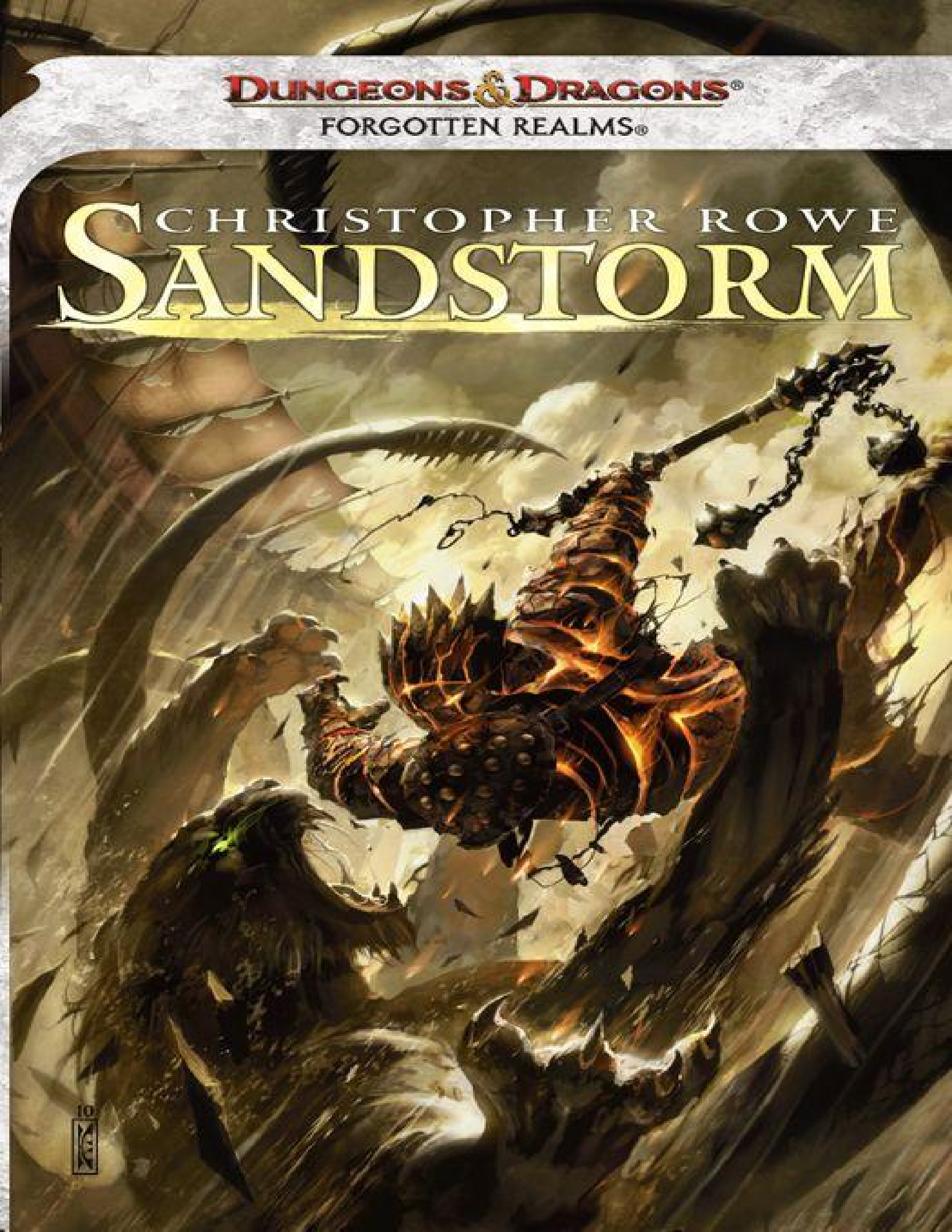
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

CHRISTOPHER ROWE

SANDSTORM



IMPRISONED IN THE VOID BY VENGEFUL GODS, THARIZDUN—THE CHAINED GOD, THE ELDER ELEMENTAL EYE—SHARES HIS EXILE WITH A POOL OF ABYSSAL LIQUID CRYSTAL THAT IS ALL THAT REMAINS OF A RUINED UNIVERSE. IT IS THE VOIDHARROW, AND IT SHALL BE HIS GIFT TO THE WORLD . . .

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SANDSTORM

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Welcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

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A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE

For the elemental creatures go
About my table to and fro,
That hurry from unmeasured mind,
To rant and rage in flood and wind …

—William Butler Yeats

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CHAPTER ONE

In the name of the most holy Great Scrivener,
I declare my tales to be true.
—Mualak yn Dulah yn Abbas
Scribe to Qysar Amahl Shoon IV

EVEN IN LATE SPRING, THE ONLY COLORS VISIBLE ON THE upland wall of the remote canyon of the Omlarandin Mountains were shades of red and brown. The vines that grew from cracks in the rock would flower soon, but then the petals would be a red so dark as to be nearly black, the color of blood drying on sand.

The enormous rocky fastness floating in midair out in the canyon was hewn from the same rock as the steep walls and was just as red. The goblins, bandits, and slaves swarming over it were dressed in leathers or rough hemp robes, so there was no color amid the rabble to distract the eye, either.

Nevertheless, from the deep cleft where he lay, spying on the earthmote, the old man took in everything with his blue eyes.

Seeing that nothing had changed out in the canyon since the last time he risked an observation, he closed his eyes to narrow slits again. This slight movement was the only motion he allowed himself.

The old man was confident that no one in the hidden floating village had the slightest inkling they were under his watch. He flattered himself that his stealth and quiet were such that he might as well have been invisible. He doubted, even, that he could have tracked himself, and Mattias Farseer was one of the finest trackers on the continent.

“Lovely perch you’ve found for yourself, old friend,” said a voice from behind him.

Mattias’s arm moved with the speed of thought, seeking the hilt of the broadsword concealed in the vines beside him on the ledge. His fingers brushed an empty scabbard, and he loosed a silent curse. But by then, he knew he was in no danger.

Gathering his heavy yew canes and slowly rolling up from his prone position to a crouch, Mattias turned his back on the earthmote hanging in the canyon for the first time in almost a month. Even if he wasn’t confident that the bandit freedmen were too busy making arrangements for their evening’s barbaric entertainment, his partner’s seeming nonchalance would have told him there was no risk of discovery.

Seem, Mattias thought, was no word for a hunter.

For an assassin, like the leather-armored figure slipping from the shadows in the cliff wall recess, “seem” was a very apt word. One of the ebony-feathered, crow-headed people known as kenku, Corvus Nightfeather seemed like a creature out of a fanciful picture in a children’s primer. His uncanny ability to move from shadow to shadow made him seem like a ghost. When he wished to, the kenku could even *seem* harmless.

Corvus extended his hand, Mattias’s sword held casually in the black talons extending from the shorn fingertips of his

gloves. “Couldn’t risk falling victim to your reflexes, Mattias. They’re still sharp—even if your wits have grown addled in your dotage.”

The hunter had traveled the South with Corvus Nightfeather for decades, but the kenku race remained as mysterious to him as it did to most of the civilized world. Mattias had no idea whether he would be considered old among the crow people, and, indeed, he had no idea how many years Corvus had stalked the world. He *did* know when he was being mocked.

“You found one of the message cairns I left for you on the rim,” Mattias said. “How long have you been looking for me?”

The kenku shrugged his narrow shoulders. “Three days,” he said. “I was on the verge of sending for Trill.”

“It’s good you didn’t,” said Mattias. “Stealth is not exactly her strong suit, and you haven’t yet even heard my report on this Jazeerijah.”

The kenku turned his head sharply, the setting sun catching the oiled feathers around his eyes in such a way that they briefly reflected the dark green of his armor. “Jazeerijah, hah!” The high-pitched caw of Corvus’s laughter could still make Mattias shudder. “Is that what they call it?”

“It’s from an Alzhedo dialect, I gather,” said Mattias, “though they speak the common tongue to their slaves and the scum that visit them. I don’t know what it means, but I’d be willing to bet you do.”

“Jazeerijah. ‘Island of the Free,’ ” Corvus said. “It’s from one of the Founding Stories of Calimshan. ‘Helpful Janna Stops the Sea from Draining,’ I think.”

“Well, by their dress and ways, the folk in charge out on that floating rock are definitely Calishites. And it’s odd you mention those stories, because—”

A shout out in the canyon echoed through the air. Most of the population of the ramshackle village of huts and tents had clustered on the rim of the floating island of rock,

human bandits mixing freely with tribal goblins. A knot of these sallow-skinned visitors pushed a primitively constructed crate toward the edge, following the directions of a chanting shaman. They stopped only when the wooden box was teetering on the rim.

“What am I seeing here, Mattias?” asked Corvus.

Mechanical sounds rang across the canyon, as chains turned through geared teeth and an enormous field of sailcloth was swiftly stretched between rocky outcrops on the earthmote and on the canyon rims.

“You’re seeing that we’re not the only showmen in these mountains tonight, Ringmaster,” Mattias answered. “You’re seeing that when those Calishites escaped their former owners, they brought their deadly games out of the desert with them.”

The kenku’s face was incapable of rendering anything like a human expression, but Mattias knew the soft clicking deep in Corvus’s beak indicated contemplation.

“They escaped the gladiatorial slave pits and decided to be enslaving gamemasters themselves? Humans never fail to impress me with their … humanity. What of the man I sent you to find?”

The old hunter indicated an open-faced shed perched at the very edge of the earthmote. Calishites armed with spears prodded a tall young man with a smooth scalp into a swinging leather net hung from a tautly wound catapult. His bronzed skin was traced with the distinctive gold lines that marked him as genasi. His muscles showed through piecemeal scale, and his gauntleted hands held an enormous double-headed flail.

“If the odds hold that the goblin bookmakers are chalking on their board,” Mattias told Corvus, “we’re about to watch him die.”



Cephas imagined that freedom must feel something similar to the way he did when he spun through the air above the Canvas Arena. Only in those times, in the scant few heartbeats that passed between the moment the freedmen forced him into the sling and the moment he hit the canvas to face whatever fresh nightmare they'd found to torment him with, did this lightness and calm fill him.

It filled him only in those times, or when he made one of his endless attempts to escape.

He always had to abandon the feeling, whichever kind of flight brought it—abandon it or die.

He had even less time to savor the feeling than usual, since the freedman manning the catapult had aimed it so that he would fall precisely atop the mysterious crate the warriors of the Bloody Moon goblin tribe had rolled onto the canvas. It burst apart as he fell, and the contents were a mystery no longer.

Up in the gamemaster's box, the master of Jazeerijah, Azad the Free, took his usual place. "The omlarcat!" the Calishite called, his magically amplified voice drowning out even the challenging scream of the beast. "Deadliest predator in these mountains, never faced in the arena before today! By authority of the sages, it is untouchable by blades and invulnerable to arrows."

The old orc woman who preceded Cephas as the mightiest fighter in the Calishites' slave pens, Grinta the Pike, had warned him about omlarcats.

"Like a black panther," she said, "but worse." She said that in other parts of the world the great predators such as the one on the canvas before him were called "displacer beasts." The omlarcat was the particular breed that hunted the deepest parts of these Omlarandin Mountains. Cephas had never seen a black panther, but he suspected they did not have pairs of spiked tentacles dancing from their shoulders. He also suspected that panthers were not nearly as canny as omlarcats, and that they did not shimmer with a fey magic

that made it difficult to tell where they crouched, even when bent over some hapless victim.

The outfitters had given Cephas his choice of weapon for the night's games. As ever, he'd picked the blacksmelt double flail they kept under lock and key between bouts. Falling through the air, he trusted his feel for the weapon's balance and began a brutal blow even before he hit the canvas.

His timing was perfect.

The weight of one spiked sphere struck the cat's skull with a sick thud, and even as he twisted to take the impact of his fall on his back, Cephas whipped the other end of the flail around, opening a crimson line across the bottom of his foe's jaw. The cat howled at the vicious, unexpected assault.

The impact of his crash against the canvas drove the breath from Cephas's lungs, but he had expected that. He dug the cleats of his boots into the weave of the billowing sailcloth battleground and came to his feet.

The cat's glowing eyes dimmed, and the staggering lunge it made at Cephas told the gladiator his blow had dazed the creature, at least for the moment. The goblins cheered when Cephas let forth a deep howl, believing his battle cry was in response to a blow the cat had managed to land unseen.

"The deadly omlarcat, brought here tonight through the primal might of the Bloody Moons!" Azad the Free roared into the night air, bringing the goblins to their feet. The tribe must have decamped in its entirety to Jazeerijah, because every row carved in the stone amphitheater overflowed with shouting, stomping goblins.

Cephas cursed. It was always better to have the crowd with him. If the match was held before the usual assemblage of bandits, miners, merchants, and assorted travelers, he might have a chance to draw them onto his side. But tonight Azad had orchestrated a crowd with a vested interest in seeing him lose.

The cat shook its heavy head, and focus returned to its eyes. The gigantic beast did not leap, though, and in fact took a step back, making a tentative, probing swipe with its clawed forepaw that Cephas easily blocked with his flail.

It's testing my defenses, Cephas thought. It's *planning*.

Cephas retreated a few steps himself, thinking quickly.

I will not run from this beast, he thought, setting the spikes of the flail heads in a blood-seeking sweep. I will run *with* it. We will escape together.

As long as it does not kill me first.

The goblins shouted as the Calishites began tapping out rhythmic beats with carved rods of stone on the chains holding the canvas. Azad directed his men to time the blows so that the rods triggered an enchantment in the works of the arena, and the canvas began to ripple and roil.

Cephas was so adept at predicting the ebb and flow of the canvas waves that he could use the motion to herd a foe to wherever on the arena suited him, even so canny a foe as the omlarcat.

The cat was testing the limits of its environment. Cephas did not doubt that the beast was capable of a prodigious leap if it needed to make one, but Azad had clearly deployed the canvas to guard against any such attempt. Broad gulfs of empty space separated every edge of the arena from the curving mote and from the canyon wall. The enspelled chains also allowed Azad to vary the elevation of his killing floor, and he had arranged the canvas so that it draped low enough that even if the cat could jump the horizontal distance to mote or canyon, it would have no place to land. The lower faces of the mote sloped inward at sharp angles, and the upland canyon wall was featureless at that point, offering no purchase that Cephas could see.

The cat appeared to be learning these things for itself, as it played a deadly game with Cephas. Man and cat—which was predator and which was prey was impossible to say—

leaped and struck, twisted, and ducked, landing blows that wounded but did not yet cripple or kill.

Cephas's efforts to discover a way to escape dovetailed with the crowd's bloodthirsty desire to see a competitive and skillfully managed combat.

I'd wager Azad regrets this night's crowd is not a wealthier one than mountain goblins, he thought. This was the kind of match that saw coin consistently changing hands, as the audience laid bets on which fighter would stumble next, on which would land a blow, even on how long a time the gamemaster would allow to pass before he threw some new complication into the mix.

Not long.

One of the chains extending from beneath the stands retracted at whip speed, and a full third of the canvas fell away, leaving what remained hanging loose and twisting.

The omlarcat had a mind possessed of more than simple canniness and leaped back just in time. Cephas, having faced hundreds of opponents, recognized that this beast was more calculating than most of the men and women he had fought. He began to worry that it would turn out to be cleverer than he was himself. Cephas was confident of his tactics, but he needed a *strategy*. He had to find a way to use the cat's natural desire to survive.

"Now!" Azad the Free bellowed.

This time Cephas anticipated the twist designed to keep the crowd on their feet before it came. Bracing himself, he was proved right.

The chainmen on the upland redoubt released the tension on their side of the canvas, leaving the surprised cat in a bad position. Its rear legs fell away with the sailcloth, and it was forced to abandon a furious attack with tentacles and claws to avoid falling into the chasm.

Cephas struck, spinning the chains of his flail in opposing circles, timing a blow that would smash one of the cat's tentacles into uselessness. But the canvas hung so slack

that one of the flail heads grazed an unlucky ripple in the material, ruining a devastating strike.

Or so it appeared to the crowd, who hooted and jeered, glad of the reprieve their captured champion was granted.

Scrambling back onto even footing with Cephas, the cat spit. What Cephas shouted next, unheard on the mote in the noise of the crowd, was not another war cry. “I could have hurt you then,” he said, “perhaps even forced you over the edge!”

Again the cat spit, and the writhing motions of its spiked tentacles quickened, matching the spins Cephas made with the flail. “I am not toying with you, cat,” he said. “Those over there, they are toying with us. They are not hunters—just killers.”

The cat’s answer was to hurl itself forward, engaging the flail with its tentacles as it extended its sinuous neck, seeking Cephas’s throat with its teeth. Cephas fell back, pushing off the cat’s twin blows with no time to spare. The cat’s bite came so near to closing on his flesh that Cephas felt moisture; whether it was his blood or the cat’s spittle, he could not have said. He maneuvered for a counterblow, only to notice that the beast’s tentacles were wrapped around the chains of the flails, far from the weapon’s shaft, decreasing the reach of its lunge.

“Yes! You see it! We do not need to kill each other. We both want to escape. We need to help each other!”

Again, the cat’s response came as a terrifying series of slashes, bites, and blows. Again, Cephas came as close to death as he had at any time during the match. The goblins howled. They felt the momentum shifting against Cephas.

Momentum, thought Cephas, and wondered whether he had imagined the intelligence he saw in the cat. “We have to go over the side,” he shouted, retreating under strike after strike from the cat’s tentacles. “They won’t expect that!”

Whether it understood him or not, the beast's assault faltered enough for Cephas to regain the initiative. The gladiator drove the beast across what remained of the killing floor's breadth. Either by its design or happenstance, the cat was soon exactly where Cephas wanted it. For the first time since the battle began, the crowd silenced as it collectively drew in its breath.

Cephas lowered his head and charged the gigantic cat. The beast raised its tentacles and opened its maw, and the goblins were ecstatic to see it welcoming Cephas's suicidal move. The crowd watched as the cat misjudged its own position or the strength of its enemy, for both of them fell over the edge—

And twisted and clawed and grabbed at the dangling canvas until they found purchase—the cat by sinking its claws into the frayed edges of the cloth, and Cephas by hanging on to the closest thing to a lifeline he could find—the viciously barbed appendages at the end of one of the cat's tentacles.

Ignoring the pain, Cephas brought his legs together in the manner he had long ago learned gave him some control when he flew through the air after a trebuchet's launch. The canvas hung far below the sight of those on the mote, and the cat snarled at its end. The force of their uncontrolled fall caused them to swing inward toward the underside of the mote, and Cephas stretched himself out as long as he could, the undulations of the cat's tentacle ceasing so that the gladiator was a deadweight at the end of a fantastic pendulum of arena, fighter, and foe.

"Come on, come on!" shouted Cephas as he felt them reaching the end of their arc against the mote. An outcropping rose up in Cephas's vision, and he angled his legs. Their movement came to a slow, almost lazy stop just as Cephas's boots brushed the stone. He buckled his powerful legs, and, as their backward swing began, he kicked off with all his might.

This time, he could not ignore the pain in his hands. Cephas's weight caused the razor-sharp cilia on the end of the tentacles to extend, shredding the calloused flesh of his palms. But he hung on, searching the far wall of the canyon as they swung down, then back up; if Cephas had wondered at the madness of his plan before, only at that last moment did he realize that everything did not depend on his strength or cleverness, or even on his desperate attempt to cajole a beastly opponent to help him in his attempt to escape the Island of the Free. At the final moment, everything depended on simple timing.

On the timing of a cat.

The omlarcat retracted its claws and Cephas's stomach lurched.

Up, up, and out the combatants flew. They hurtled through space, clearing the canyon's edge. As they fell together, the cat wrenched its tentacle from Cephas's grasp and laid a long wound open across his back. Cephas took this as an indication that their temporary alliance had ended.

By comparison, the crash into a stand of thorny bushes felt almost comfortable. Cephas struck his head against a rock and blinked away the doubling in his vision to find the cat springing away into the hills. From where he lay bleeding on the ground, Cephas, bruised and broken in more than one place, heard something he never had in a life spent entirely on the floating world of Jazeerijah.

Cephas forgot his injuries, because of the singing.

A deep, wordless thrumming rose up from below. The ground itself sang to him.

He was still listening, coming to understand what the Calishites had spent two decades keeping from him, when Azad the Free and two guards armed with crossbows appeared above him. The tips of their bolts were smeared with brown paste.

The master of Jazeerijah gestured, and the bolts flew toward Cephas's chest.



Corvus’s ebony beak pointed up to the blackening sky. The extraordinary escape had taken the combatants to a spot directly above his and Mattias’s heads, where the pair had watched the Calishite leader running with guards even as the young gladiator began his impossible pendulum swing.

“They knew what he was doing,” said the kenku. “The freedmen knew he would try to escape their arena in the sky and were ready for him.”

“It wasn’t hard to predict,” Mattias said.

The kenku cocked his head sideways. “Why?”

Counting, Mattias thought back over his month spent studying the earthmote and its people. “I’ve watched that lad fight sixteen times now,” he said.

“And he’s used combat to launch an escape attempt once before?” asked Corvus.

Mattias shook his head. “No, old friend,” he said. “He’s used combat to launch escape attempts *fifteen* times before.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Yes, my arms are thin.
It’s my wits I’ll use to best you!”
—“Clever Janna and the Fire Giant”
The Founding Stories of Calimshan
Printed and Bound at Calimport
The Year of the Broken Blade (1260 DR)

CEPHAS WOKE IN HIS CELL WITH THE STENCH OF *kan’challanah* strong in his nostrils. This was the paste the Calishite freedmen bought from the goblin shamans. The tribes used the foul substance, ground from a black fungus that grew in the shady ledges of the canyon, to incapacitate the monsters they brought to serve as their champions on the Canvas Arena.

A sharp pain distracted him from the smell. Grinta the Pike crouched over him, dabbing the pair of shallow bolt wounds in his chest with a stick wrapped in rags. When he tried to move a hand to block her none-too-gentle ministrations, he found that his arms and legs were chained.

Grinta saw he was awake and gave him her ugly, snaggle-tusked grin. “The word our masters use for that excrement means ‘unbreakable chain.’ Seems he trusts iron more than goblin alchemy, though.”

If Cephas had a friend on the earthmote, it was the old orc woman. On the orders of the Calishites, she had taught him much of what he knew about arena fighting. They did not know she had taught him other things as well, such as snatches of the language they used among themselves but forbade their slaves to use. She had even taught him a bit about the wider world off the mote, which, as far as Cephas could remember, he had never seen.

“My husband trusts only two things in this world, drudge,” said another woman’s familiar—and unwelcome—voice, coming from outside Cephas’s cell. “His mind, which forms his will. And my hand, which carries it out. Finish your work there and bring the dirt djinni to our chambers.”

Once, long ago, he had watched Grinta the Pike wield the wicked polearm that named her against a mated pair of dire wolves. The beasts had been starved to madness and baited to fury by a band of elf adventurers seeking to win the earthmote itself in a high-stakes wager with Azad. The wolves had fallen, but Grinta had been torn open from left shoulder to right hip. The scars she still bore across her torso were thick as ropes.

Even then, forced to push her own guts back inside with her own hands, Grinta the Pike had shown no fear.

Only Azad’s wife, Shaneerah, could make Grinta show fear.

“Yes, my lady,” said the old orc woman, and dug a dirty fingernail into one of Cephas’s wounds. He gasped in pain instead of voicing the taunt he wanted to throw at Shaneerah. “I’ll patch him up and strap him into his sandals straightaway.”

The Calishite woman, called the Queen of the Rock by slaves and freedmen alike, tossed a brass key onto the

planked floor of Cephas's peculiar cell on leaving, her shadow departing the low grate that formed its only egress.

Grinta slapped Cephas across the mouth with the back of her hand. "Fool!" she said. "Azad keeps that woman's rage in check when it comes to you, gods know why, but he'll not stay her hand against me. I came just close enough to besting her on the canvas when she trained me up to know that I could never match her, even in the old days."

Grinta used the key to open the shackles at Cephas's wrists and ankles. Rubbing the dark marks left on his gold skin by the iron, Cephas said, "I wouldn't let that happen. Azad knows I would refuse to fight if he harmed you. And if he *did* harm you, he knows I'm as skilled as Shaneerah."

Cephas's cell was barely large enough for the two of them, so Grinta had to scoot backward to slide open the grate. One of the mysterious and extraordinary measures the freedmen took to ensure Cephas never touched bare earth was the design of the cell, the only home he'd ever known. A wooden box slightly less than his height in each of its dimensions, it hung from a hook extending from one of the ancient engines that dotted the mote.

Grinta slid through the entrance and stopped the slow spin their movement had caused in the hanging cell. Indicating that Cephas should stick his feet out first, she answered his boast about the couple who ruled Jazeerijah. "You may match Shaneerah's skill. *May*, I say. But she would meet you on the canvas with more than just speed and strength. A fighter must have something—"

"A fighter must have something to fight for—yes, you have told me that a thousand times. Haven't I answered you?"

Grinta took down a pair of wooden sandals with comically thick soles from a peg beside the grate. She strapped them to Cephas's feet and said, "Perhaps you have," she said, "if your answers are your attempts to escape. Have you answered a thousand times?"

The grate, in the middle of one wall and flush with the floor, was so narrow that Cephas had to turn his broad shoulders at an angle to pass through. Balancing on the wooden sandals, he shrugged, and said, “Today made six hundred and forty answers. I owe you some yet.”

The prod she gave him in the back nearly toppled him over. He recovered his balance and walked along the boardwalk the freedmen had laid that described the borders of his life. Except for when he was on the canvas, he was allowed only those places where the boardwalk led—his cell, the kitchens, the training grounds, and the hollow stone outcropping where Shaneerah lived with Azad. It was to this last location that Grinta took him.

As he raised his hand to knock on the wooden door, Grinta signaled him to wait. “The flail you fight with, Cephas, never forget Azad once wielded it in the desert hell these freedmen escaped. They claim he was the finest gladiator in their homeland. It’s not just Shaneerah you’ll face on the day you push him too far.”

Cephas furrowed his brow. “I cannot imagine such a thing,” he said.

“That Azad the Free would fight you?” asked Grinta.

Cephas shook his head. “That Azad the Free would fight anyone at all.”



One of his long-dead instructors had said of Corvus that if the kenku had a heart, it must be sewn down one side and bound in leather covers. Corvus rarely thought of the men, women, and stranger creatures who had educated him in the ways of shadow. Books, though, were rarely far from his thoughts.

As soon as he and Mattias stepped out of the shadowy portal that had taken them from the canyon side to this hidden camp, he drew forth his most prized possession from

the otherworldly cache he accessed through his own breast feathers, a volume covered in dark blue scales he called his journey book. It contained rituals, recipes, maps, notes—any form of information that might be scribed down on pages could be read in the thick book, though there were few people in the Realms who could read the alphabets Corvus used most often.

Dark snow had collected on his and Mattias's clothing as they traveled the shadow ways, but the kenku noticed that the old man did not bother to brush it from his cloak. They were much farther down the mountain at this hidden camp, and the heat of the early afternoon melted and then evaporated the flakes.

The women rushing into Mattias's arms ignored any dampness as well; even the dampness caused by the tears on the old man's cheeks. He had not seen any of his companions from Nightfeather's Circus of Wonders for long tendays, least of all those of Corvus's secret corps of operatives gathered here. Shan and Cynda, twin halflings, supported Mattias's weight even as they brushed aside his canes to embrace him. The women did not speak in greeting him, since they never spoke at all.

Such could not be said of the third and final figure who had waited for them at the foot of the canyon. If he had kept still, Tobin, the rocky-skinned goliath, might have been mistaken for a pillar of granite. The huge man towered over Mattias in much the same way the ranger towered over the sisters. "Mattias!" he said, his voice booming. "It has been too long since you left the wagons!"

Mattias lifted his hand in greeting but cast his gaze about for another missed companion. He spied a tumbled heap of leather harnesses and brass chainwork on the far side of the smokeless fire. "Where is she?" he asked.

Tobin clapped a heavy hand down on Mattias's shoulder, and the twins had to scramble to keep themselves upright. "She is looking for food. We left the wagons at sunset last

night and have been climbing hard since then. I could have carried enough for her, but Corvus—”

“Corvus instructed you to make haste,” interrupted the kenku, “which I see you have, and to move stealthily, which I continue to delude myself into asking of you, you great lummox.”

The goliath shrugged. “This is rocky ground, Ringmaster,” he said. “The sounds of my passage are natural enough. And the twins make no noise, even when they climb and leap so that it is hard for me to keep up.”

“Yes, well,” said Corvus, “we’re all here now, and there was no sign on the earthmote that any of us have been spotted. We get to go in on our own terms for once.”

Mattias scoffed. “When have you ever done anything not on your own terms?” he asked.

Corvus did not answer, but with one talon began sketching a surprisingly accurate rendition of Jazeerijah in the sand. “Our principal objective is a rescue, or possibly a kidnapping, depending on how things develop.” Drawing in the canyon, he spotted redoubts that housed the chains of the Canvas Arena, and the other four leaned in.

“Some of us will approach by stealth, tonight, and some of us in disguise, tomorrow,” Corvus continued. “Our exits will be less subtle.”



Azad the Free claimed that the shaft of the double flail, currently resting on a stand in his quarters, was carved from the heartwood of a tree an ancient guild of smiths had tended for six hundred years, then cut down and carved until nothing remained but a rod as thick as Cephas’s wrist and as long as a running man’s stride.

Each end of the rod was capped with a boss of blacksmelt fused so perfectly to the wood that Cephas’s calloused fingertips could not feel the joins when he used the weapon

in the arena. The metal was black by its nature, and the wood was black by its age, but the chains hanging from the bosses were a sparkling silver. The links appeared too delicate to bear the heavy weight of the barbed spheres at their ends, but when Azad the Free lifted the double-headed flail from its velvet-lined stand, expertly rolling it over the back of his hand in a lazy arc, the strength and balance of the weapon appeared perfect to Cephas's experienced eye.

Azad never had any guard but his wife, Shaneerah, when he called Cephas to the apartment carved in the stone behind the gamemaster's box. The Calishite woman stood at her husband's shoulder, one hand resting on the pommel of the throwing dagger tucked in her belt.

"I called you here because my wife believes I should use this flail to kill you, Cephas. But I thought I would read you a tale, instead."

Keeping a tradition from the days when his human ancestors still ruled in their desert homeland, Azad sometimes brought the denizens of Jazeerijah together in the arena stands. These were nights when there were no games held for merchants up from the lowlands or tribesmen down from the peaks. There, he would stand in the gamemaster's box and speak to "his people." Grinta called this "playing at patriarchy."

On some nights, he would rant drunkenly at his fellow countrymen, reminding them that the mission of the Island of the Free was to build an army, and that he, the greatest gladiator who ever stalked the sands of Calimport, would lead this army south to retake the ancient city from the djinni scum who had usurped it. Cephas first learned to sleep with his eyes open during these harangues.

On certain other nights, Cephas paid very careful attention, indeed. On those nights, when the moon Selûne cast bright-enough light, Azad brought forth something in the presence of which Cephas would never dream of sleeping. Some nights, Azad brought forth a book.

“These are the Founding Stories,” he would say, casually flipping pages as if he were not casting the most potent magic Cephas could imagine. “This collection here.” Azad’s bottle of palm wine would find his lips at this point. “This book was made on the order of Kamar yn Saban el Djenispool, the leader, the great *human* leader of all Calimshan, sometime … I don’t know, sometime back in those old days.”

A book was a sort of box made of leather, and its contents the rustling stuff of dreams. Dreams, Cephas had long ago learned, could be captured with an elixir called ink and locked in prisons called pages. To set them free again, one had to know a sort of magic that the Calishites kept from Cephas, a discipline called reading.

One night long ago, when Cephas was not even half the height he would grow to, around the time of his fiftieth escape attempt, Azad read aloud a story called “The Chain That Set Bashan Reaver Free.” It told of a human slave who learned to slip his iron collar at night, and who discovered that the very chains that bound him could be used as weapons in his desperate quest for freedom. In the tale, the slave Bashan became a desert raider with thirty wives to do his bidding, and a thousand camels.

Then Azad brought out a double-headed flail—*this* double-headed flail—and held it high above his head. “Do you remember this, Brothers?” he asked. “Do you remember the chain I used to wear; the chain I used to set us free?”

Everyone in the stands, even Cephas, awkwardly crouched on his high-soled clogs, had cheered. Cephas, though, had been cheering for Bashan Reaver, not for Azad.

Now the master of games lifted his hand from the weapon and walked over to another wooden stand. This one swiveled so that the object it held was concealed from view until Azad slowly rotated it toward Cephas. It held the *Book of Founding Stories*. For a moment, Cephas thought Azad really was going to read aloud, probably a story meant to teach him a

lesson about the futility of escape, but the young man didn’t mind. He had yet to hear a story from the book that he did not learn something valuable from, even if what he learned was not what the story—or its reader—meant to teach.

“Yes, I thought I would read you a story,” said Azad, opening the book. “But which one? Which one could teach the lesson that I mean to impart?” Azad was among the oldest of the Calishites, perhaps even as old as Grinta the Pike, but he was heavily muscled, with the build of a brawler. Still, his thick fingers managed the delicate act of turning pages nimbly.

“And then I realized the time for lessons is past. You have ignored so many, after all. No, now is the time for punishment.”

Cephas tensed, but Shaneerah had not moved from her relaxed stance. In fact, there was a glint of amusement in her eye.

“So now is when I tell you, Cephas,” finished Azad, “that you will never see this book, or hear any of its stories, again.”

CHAPTER THREE

The claims of the elf sages may be disregarded,
as they are born of vanity and fancy.
The dwarves depend on legends, not scholarship.
History is clear. The djinn invented war.
—Akabar ibn Hrellam
Empires of the Shining Sands, vol. iv
Printed and Bound at Keltar
960 DR

FOR ALL HIS FAULTS, AND HE WAS MORE THAN WILLING TO admit they were many, the freedman Talid was no fool. He knew what his fellow former slaves thought of him. He knew, too, that the only time he was ever assigned guard duty on the downland bridge was when Azad and Shaneerah judged that there was no threat from that direction. Other than a few hapless wildcat miners scratching in unpromising places, the western mountains were empty.

That suited Talid just fine. He regretted he wouldn't be able to liberate any whiskey from the kitchens during the night's matches, but he knew he wouldn't have to go to the

trouble of actually watching the downslope trail, either. Talid usually managed to get a great deal of rest on guard duty.

He was not yet fully asleep when the rumbling sound came from behind him, and a wave of cool, moisture-laden air flowed over the canyon rim. Talid turned just in time to see a boulder that had sat immobile by the trail since the Calishites had arrived, a boulder under which he had been shaded on more than one occasion, fall back to the ground with a heavy thud, as if it had hovered in the air before he turned around.

The bandit quickly forgot any questions about levitating boulders when he spotted the three figures standing before him. Talid had seen dwarves many times, of course. The savage clans on the jungle islands south of Calimport were a favorite source of new talent for the genasi who had owned him. And these mountains were home to their own variety of the squat, muscle-bound little men. Once or twice a year one would show up on the canvas, usually lasting longer than most humans.

But neither the wild-eyed jungle dwarves he'd known in the South nor the quieter ones he'd encountered since Azad had led them north prepared him for the pair that confronted him on the trail. Talid was an expert on arms and armor, so he knew a good word to describe the baroque angles and intricate details, infinitely impractical, of the bejeweled suits of armor these two white-beards wore. That word was "archaic."

As for the goliath fighter who loomed behind them, his mail shirt and enormous mattock struck Talid as infinitely practical.

The dwarves were a little shorter than Talid, who was not a tall man, but their shoulders were twice the breadth of his. They wore full suits of plate, ridiculous off a military battlefield; certainly no soldier had designed them. The ores that went into their making—unrecognizable to Talid—bore a

sheen so high that at first the Calishite thought their golden color reflected the late-afternoon sun. And the jewels!

Cuirass and vambrace, hipguard and gauntlet, every surface that did not bear a spike or serration; all were fitted with a multifaceted ruby, sapphire, or emerald, and with other precious stones Talid didn't know. They were clear in color, flaming orange, or royal purple, and none of them, no matter their hue, was smaller than the size of Talid's eyes just then.

But the demeanor the dwarves projected was not martial. Rather, it was haughty, confident, to be sure, and troubled at finding Talid standing there, not because he represented a threat but because he was a bothersome inconvenience. The attitude they wordlessly expressed reminded Talid of nothing so much as the windsouled genasi back in Calimport; he had seen them almost every day of the first five decades of his life, but they almost never saw him at all. Only the memory of that inhuman haughtiness kept him from shaking in fear as the huge warrior reached down and between the dwarves and relieved Talid of his spear.

The dwarf who was not bearing a sword began to speak, but not to Talid, and not in any tongue he was familiar with. This ancient being bent almost double under the weight of the king's ransom of precious stones woven into his enormous mustache. He leaned on a pair of canes that must have had wood or bone somewhere in their construction, but for all that Talid could tell, were cut straight from a vein of silver.

The armed dwarf, whom Talid judged the younger one, startled the Calishite by speaking in perfectly accented Low Alzhedo, the language the slave classes in the Emirates used among themselves.

"Legate Arnskull offers you a gift, though he must recognize that it is of little value. He offers you your life."

Talid was a liar and a thief. He was lazy, dishonorable, and, worst of all—in the eyes of the other women and men who'd

followed Azad’s promises across a waterless hell—he was weak. But he was not a fool.

“Please convey my thanks to the legate,” he said. “And please tell me what services I may rush to provide.”



The next time Cephas woke in his cell, the woman leaning over him was not Grinta. He fought the urge to scramble back, to hold his arms in front of his face in a defensive position.

The first time he’d ever seen one of the little people the other slaves called halflings, he’d mistaken the man for a human child and paid for the mistake when the man efficiently hamstrung him. Without a word, the man had then disappeared over the edge of the mote, the only slave to ever successfully escape Azad’s clutches.

This woman—the lines beneath her eyes and the scars on her hands would never let anyone mistake her for a child—held a short sword beneath his chin. She gazed down at him with impenetrable brown eyes. He shifted his gaze left and saw that the woman was also standing beside his cell’s grillwork door.

Before Cephas could decide whether he was dreaming or still seeing double from the blow to the head he’d taken on the cliff, the woman by the door flicked her right ring finger in a clear signal. The one standing above him leaned in, putting enough weight into the blade at his throat that Cephas felt his own blood flowing over his skin for the twentieth time in less than a day.

The halfling woman placed her forefinger before her lips and breathed out. In the dying light of late afternoon, Cephas was able to recognize that she was not a perfect double of the one by the grill, though the resemblance was uncanny.

The woman standing at his side lowered her hand and drew a cylindrical object from the pouch at her belt. Still moving in perfect silence, she handed this over to Cephas. It was a long sheet of some thin, fibrous material, and Cephas had a good idea what it was. Thinking of the tale of the Land-locked Marid, he gingerly unrolled the sheet. He whispered, without meaning to, “A scroll …”

The sisters—for they were clearly such—exchanged a quick, confused glance. The one next to Cephas, who wore her chestnut-colored hair to her shoulders whereas her sister’s was cropped close to the scalp, eyed Cephas uncertainly. She twirled the fingers of her left hand—Cephas noted that her right held a dagger—mimicking his unfurling of the scroll in a faster pantomime.

Complicated rows of black lines were inked onto the parchment. He showed the unrolled scroll to the women. “I’ve never held writing in my hands before,” he said, still unsure of their purpose but unable to believe they would give him a scroll *and* mean him harm.

The sister closer to him opened her mouth and eyes wide, as clear an indication of surprise as any Cephas had ever seen on the canvas. In response, the other woman clapped her free hand against her forehead and shook her shoulders. Even though it was silent, Cephas recognized the halfling’s laughter.

“You thought I would be able to read this,” he said. “And now you mock me because I cannot. But it’s no fault of mine. Azad says that letters are for the free. If you are free women, then read me what is written here.”

They leveled long, inscrutable looks at each other. Then, as one, they kneeled before him and put their hands to the heavy scarves wrapped around their necks. As one, they lowered the scarves, and Cephas saw the flesh there was gray and lifeless. If these halfling sisters meant to mock him, they would have to find means other than taunts, for it was clear they had no voices.



There was a dwarf among the caravan guards up from Saradush—a greasy-bearded spearman with evil breath—and Azad sent for the man to serve as a translator. He did not want to depend on the strange dwarf whose Alzhedo was too flawless for Azad's liking. Luckily, the guard was more or less sober, but his usefulness proved limited.

The man was awestruck by the pair, and, in any case, it grew apparent that the one Talid had claimed spoke only a Dwarvish tongue—this Legate Arnskull—had no plans to speak in Azad's presence.

"He ain't likely to start any time soon, neither, sir," said the spearman, running dirty fingers through his beard. It took Azad a moment to realize that the man was actually attempting to groom himself. "Look at them runes on the legate's armor. Look at the pattern of the gems in his beard—sapphire, then garnet, then sapphire, then diamonds colored like chalcedony. Sir, that is a lord out of legend sitting on your pillows there—one of the high councilors of Iltkazar; a prince of Old Shanatar, and liegeman to the Clanless King."

The elderly dwarf with the mustache sat ignoring everyone in Azad's quarters, sniffing at the plate of figs and dates Shaneerah had ordered brought, without deigning to let one pass his lips. Azad grabbed the caravan guard by the scruff of his neck and hauled him to his feet.

The other strange dwarf, who had not given a name and chuckled when Shaneerah suggested that he sheathe his sword, watched the Calishite with undisguised interest, and not a little amusement. Azad reminded himself that these fools—whoever they were—had elected to come alone and barely armed into *his* place of power.

He shoved the spearman toward the exit. Shaneerah, standing guard beside it, opened the cedarwood door and hurried the dwarf along with a curse and a kick. Azad turned

to the supposed legate's bondsman, and said, "Your finery impressed that fool. But that's still not to prove the old man is some kind of ambassador from the dwarves who built this place. If you thought he might encounter the forces who took the mote from your people, why would he come without an armed escort?"

"The legate's mission, freedman," said the dwarf, still using the archaic dialect of Alzhedo that the djinn of the deserts favored, "is one of investigation and research. The outpost that was here when you and your people arrived was *not* sanctioned by our king, Mith Barak, and the outlaws who built it absconded from our caverns with several valuable machines we wish to recover. If these are still to be found among the equipment you have claimed, and should you maintain your refusal to simply wager the earthmote on the contest between our goliath servant and your champion, we will offer you salvage fees we believe you will find most reasonable."

Azad glanced at the older dwarf's supposed badges of rank. Sapphire, then garnet, then diamond, the spearman said. Yes, these dwarves could afford to buy anything Azad might be willing to sell.

"We put all the machines we've found to our own uses," he said. "That's why there is an arena for our fighters to meet upon. What if you're after something we don't wish to part with?"

The bondsman said, "The legate considered this possibility when we heard of the … imaginative way in which you deploy the furlers and the taps. Not to worry." From his sleeve, the dwarf drew forth a small book, the gilded clasp of which was crafted not only to lock the cover, but to hold an ebony stylus topped with a ruby the size of a robin's egg. "Should you have found a use for the particular instruments we wish to retrieve, I will simply execute a schematic, and the legate will re-create the devices upon our return to Iltkazar. You have been here for twenty years, after all," he

added. “The machines have no doubt suffered in your unskilled hands.”

“No doubt,” Azad agreed. “Which only leaves the question of why I shouldn’t let my dear wife relieve the legate of his enormously impressive mustache and send the two of you back to your holes with a warning to this clanless king that the next time he wants something from me, he should send a more impressive delegation.” Azad ran his hand over his own smooth chin. “The legate shouldn’t worry, of course. Shaneerah has a steady hand with a shaving razor.”

The pleasant expression on the standing dwarf’s face did not change. “The fee for merely studying the machines, instead of taking them with us when we leave, is, of course, smaller.” He still held the unadorned short sword loose at his side and made no moves with it, not even the idle gestures that would normally accompany conversation.

The old dwarf made a sign then. He waved the younger one over and indicated that he wanted to stand. The bondsman took one smooth step to his master, and, still not varying that loose, easy grip on his sword, extended his other arm. The legate made a wheezing noise as he pulled himself to his feet. The inelegant effort was painful to watch. He murmured something that reached only the younger dwarf’s ears.

“The legate wishes to begin our inventory of the mote’s machinery,” said the bondsman. “The sun begins to set, and he does not like to sleep above ground.”

The old dwarf produced a pair of silver canes, and began shuffling to the door, not even glancing in Azad’s direction. Azad started to speak, but to his surprise, Shaneerah interrupted him.

“There is a stairway cut out of the ground a few paces to the left. It is the closest,” she said, swinging the door open. “Please wait for me there, and I will take you down to the winch below our quarters. I ask that you not go down alone

—the man working the machine will draw on you if I do not accompany you. I will be there in a moment.”

The legate never even slowed but simply hobbled through the door. Azad noted the old man did turn left, even though his bondsman had not offered a translation. The younger dwarf sketched a brief bow to Azad, then swept out the door.

Shaneerah put a hand on his shoulder, and Azad leaned his head over to kiss her weathered fingers. “You mean to kill them in the narrow spaces where the works are housed?” he asked.

His wife squeezed his shoulder, then withdrew her hand. “Oh, my husband,” she said, “did you never face any of the stout folk in the arena? Confine them in close quarters and they become twice as deadly. No, my love, your eye has grown dull if you believe that old man endangered himself coming here. I do not know what the one you called a ‘bondsman’ is, but I know my heart and head tell me he could kill us both with a thought.”



Though Cephas was trained to always think of gladiatorial combat as a show for a paying audience before anything else, at heart he was a warrior—the moves he made that elicited the guttural cheers and savage hisses of the unlawful arena crowds were theatrical because they were the moves he knew best. The nature of the arena floor, with its variation and unexpected threats thrown against the combatants to thrill the bettors in the stands, demanded a fighting style that was almost as much flash as it was edge.

So Cephas knew what a show was. But he had never seen one such as the halflings silently acted out in his cell.

The women were clearly capable fighters. They had the wariness of eye and the grace of movement that the best Cephas ever faced possessed, and they handled their keen weapons with easy familiarity.

But they were also storytellers.

The short-haired halfling rolled her shoulders and bounced across the floor. She untied her short sword's sheath from her belt and twisted the scabbard through the air, rolling it across the backs of her hands in a move that exactly mimicked the attack of a flail. She gave Cephas a haughty look, threw her shoulders back again, and stretched to her full height before putting her back to the wall opposite Cephas and sliding down to a seated position that mirrored his own.

"I get it," he said. "You're me."

The other woman gave him a curt nod but again indicated that he should be silent. She was making a performance of her own. If the two women were different in stature, Cephas would not have guessed it. Yet the long-haired sister now seemed taller, bulkier, slower. This time, the loosened scabbard was not a fast-spinning flail, but some huge and heavy weapon, wielded with such ease, Cephas realized, because the halfling woman was meant to be some warrior even stronger than he was himself.

The shorter-haired woman suddenly leaped to her feet, then leaped again in an arc that suggested a much greater distance than what she could truly achieve in the cramped space. Cephas felt the cell rock on its suspending chain, and he hoped no one outside would be curious about what caused the motion.

That first leap was familiar to Cephas. It was a diminished version of the flying attack he had made against the omlarcat the day before. Had these women been in the audience?

Then the other halfling—clearly not meant to be a cat but still some gigantic man spinning a polearm or greathammer—struck her sister a solid blow in the chest, knocking the woman to the floor. The hammer danced, and the woman holding it rushed to capitalize on the heavy strike she had just landed. Rise and fall, rise and fall, the hammer blows

came down in such quick succession that Cephas could barely follow the moves. The halfling woman meant to be him avoided the strikes by twisting and turning on her back.

Cephas started to speak, but the women anticipated his interruption. Simultaneously, they glared at him, even while they kept up the moves and feints of what made for a fierce gladiatorial game.

His survival in the show-battle they were acting appeared in doubt. The short-haired sister simply stopped fighting, and, in an action conveying surrender, kneeled before her sister. The hammer rose again, but instead of striking a final time, the longer-haired woman gave her sister a friendly chuck on the shoulder. At this signal, the woman portraying him stood, then made a lightning-fast swing with her weapon directly at her sister's head.

The woman watched, raising no defense, and the flail swung wide. Now it was the short-haired woman who gave her sister a playful cuff. Both women spread their hands, dropped their weapons, and embraced each other.

They turned to Cephas, eyebrows raised.

"If I fight a giant with a hammer," he said, "he is my friend. We should make a show, as I did with the cat."

The long-haired woman gave Cephas a broad grin and stepped over to pat him on the head. Even her sister, who was clearly of a grimmer disposition, smiled briefly.

"But why?" Cephas asked, ignoring their praise.

The smiling sister picked her short sword up from where it lay on the floor. She held it straight up above her head in the manner of a triumphant warrior, then angled the tip back and dragged the point across the rafter above her. The noise was soft, but clear—a steady scratch of metal digging into wood, punctuated by a rhythmic tick every time the point passed through one of the 640 marks Cephas had gouged there with his thumbnail.

As the halfling dragged her sword faster, the ticking sounds came closer and closer together until they made a

steady hum; a hum that reminded Cephas of the song he had heard from the ground before Azad's men struck him down. The woman was erasing all his past attempts to escape.

"If I make a story out of a fight with this giant," he said, "you will help me escape Jazeerijah?"

Again, the smiling woman nodded.

"When?" he asked.

A roar rose from the arena. The first bouts, mastered by one of Azad's lieutenants and featuring gangs of goblins fighting against merchants' guards, had begun as the sun set. The short-haired woman jerked her head toward the noise.

"Tonight?" Cephas asked.

She nodded at him, then at her sister, who responded by gathering up their discarded sheaths and flipping her sister's sword off the floor with the toe of her boot. The short-haired woman caught it and the scabbard that followed, then eased the grillwork door open. The cell had been unlocked the entire time.

Before the pair disappeared into the growing darkness, Cephas called out to them, suddenly recognizing the fatal flaw in their plan. "Wait!" he said.

Only the short-haired woman came back to the door.

"The fight," Cephas said. "The one you played out. It cannot work that way on the canvas."

The woman raised one eyebrow, waiting.

"Your sister played her role too well," said Cephas. "There is no one who can swing a real hammer that way. They are too heavy."

This time, the grimmer sister's smile was not just a faint echo of her happier kin's. If anything, the woman was laughing, if silently.

It was the only reply she offered Cephas before she and her sister faded into the night.

Shaneerah could not tell if the elderly dwarf did anything more than narrow his rheumy eyes before each winch and wheel, sometimes muttering through his mustache, but more often just swinging one of his canes impatiently at the swordsman who so unnerved her. Then, the smiling dwarf would say, “The legate has completed his inspection and thanks you—where is the next device?” The trio would make their slow way to the next station, their pace dictated by the legate’s shuffle.

Finally, in a redoubt that looked much the same to her as any other, the younger dwarf spoke. “Yes, this is the very apparatus we were seeking. Most intriguing.”

They had made their way to the last of the winches Azad rigged to support the floor of his arena. Her agitation to see the men off the mote grew with each passing moment, spiking to an almost-unbearable level when she realized the bondsman had, at some point, switched from the dialect of High Alzhedo used in Calimport, to the fiery, sibilant-heavy patois of the firesouled and their efreet; the language of her youth.

Shaneerah taught the gladiators in Azad’s pathetic stable to ignore fear—to master it, to *eliminate* it if at all possible. This, she said, was the way of any true fighter.

It was not the only lie she told them.

Shaneerah sometimes thought fear was her oldest friend, or her oldest *friends*, rather, for she had known countless fears. And Shaneerah realized why the smiling dwarf frightened her.

In a life that had lasted longer than she had any right to expect, this was the first time she had met a fear she could not name.

Cephas immediately found he had been right. The long-haired halfling woman's imitation of his foe was not accurate; she was slow as pinesap compared to this laughing giant.

As usual, Grinta had come for him, but this time she was even more abrupt than usual.

"What is it?" asked Cephas, fearing that the Calishites had discovered his would-be coconspirators.

Grinta pushed him toward the arena, where Azad already employed his gamemaster's patter, indicating that the night's main event was about to begin.

"Lots of strange people about tonight," said Grinta. "We all expected unblooded goblins and beardless boys to make up the whole card tonight since you let the Bloody Moon's prize slip away. And we certainly didn't expect Azad to put you up for a challenge on a single day's rest after the beating it gave you. Too many unexpected things; too many folk I've never seen. Never even seen the like of."

They came to the outfitting rooms. "I thought you claimed to have seen every kind of man who walked the realms," said Cephas.

Grinta nodded. "I've seen goliaths, sure," she said. "Even killed a few. Never saw one in this part of the world, though, and sure as the Hells never saw one fighting under the sponsorship of dwarves. And to top that, with his own hands, Azad brought down both his flail and his armor for you to use, while Shaneerah's disappeared into the works passages with the dwarves. It almost makes me think she's making a move against her husband."

Cephas let the older woman dress and arm him, wondering if all of the unusual events were good or bad for him. "She would never harm Azad," he said.

The orc spat to one side. "Shaneerah always acts in Azad's best interests," she said. "That doesn't mean she won't kill him someday."

Cephas hadn’t had time to ask Grinta what she meant by that before rough hands shoved him into the trebuchet’s sling and he spilled onto the canvas like an offering before this endlessly surprising fighter.

Feints and dodges, slips that turned into thrusts, direct assaults that saw the giant bouncing away before he followed through—every move the goliath made was unexpected—or would have been, if he had not cheerfully announced every action before he took it.

“Now watch here, Cephas,” the giant growled, the words reaching Cephas’s ears *beneath* the noise of the crowd and Azad’s increasingly frantic announcements. “I am a bigger man than some, so, if I drop to a knee, they don’t expect me to roll through and use the spring of the canvas to come up behind you, do they? Ha! Did you see me? It worked pretty fine, I think!”

Cephas was too busy making his own acrobatic tuck and roll in a desperate bid to avoid the weight of the goliath’s mattock to respond. For the first few moments of the fight, he attempted to engage the man in conversation, but while the goliath clearly welcomed the idea—Cephas had thought for a moment the warrior forgot they were combatants, his greeting was so genuine—Cephas soon needed all his breath to keep up the martial dance the two of them invented move by move.

“I like this canvas floor, did you know? We have much canvas in the wagons, but we use it for our roof and walls at *our* shows!” The goliath, for no reason Cephas could discern beyond the simple fact that he could, took a huge bouncing leap. Then, when he plunged back down onto the sailcloth, he stuck his armored legs straight out before him so that he hit the canvas with the seat of his breeches. When he was thrown back up into the air, the goliath whooped in clear delight.

“Fearless!” called Azad, his voice ringing across the canyon night. “How long has it been since a thinking foe

showed no fear before Cephas of Jazeerijah?”

Cephas wanted to shout that it had just been the day before, but the goliath’s tumble turned out to conceal a subtle forward motion that brought his hammer into range.

“I am going to swing this mattock straight at your head, Cephas! They’ll like that!”

And they did. Goblin and human voices were harmonizing in shouts for Cephas’s blood when the stone hammer clipped him above the right ear. Cephas spun with the blow, amazed that he was still conscious. He wondered whether it was a prop, a practice weapon such as the ones Shaneerah issued them when they trained. That would explain how the giant spun it about like a fencer’s blade.

As if in answer, the goliath said, “I saw the twins do this once up on their wire—they were being Azoun and Yamun Khahan. Do you know that story? Oh, that is a good one.”

The goliath, Cephas was coming to realize, was not his equal as a fighter. Had Cephas ignored the endless stream of talk and set his mind on making a quick end to the fight, it would have been a formidable but conquerable task. What the man excelled at was not fighting but *moving*. Elaborate, outsized movements marked his style, yes, but so did subtleties and barely perceptible motions that were invisible to those in the stands.

An example was this step and sweep move that left Cephas on his back, his own flail tangled around his arm braces.

“See, this Yamun was one king from the East, and Azoun, he was another king from the West, and they were both humans, so that meant there was nothing for them to do but fight. Shan and Cynda make a big show of it, but this time I’m thinking of, we were up North, in country where everybody knows the story. So they spiced it up.”

The goliath flopped down on top of Cephas, driving the air from his lungs and pinning him to the canvas. “The West-man used a steel long sword as all those West-men do in the

stories, and the East-man had a curved one. The West-man wins unless you're telling this story on the other side of the Rift."

The goliath rolled away, and Cephas reacted to the incoherent shouts from the gamemaster's box by shoving free, seeking to gain advantage.

"But as I said, we were in the West, and they all knew what would happen, even if the twins were up on their wire. Well, weren't they surprised when they switched out the swords in the middle of the fight! Oh, I laughed!"

The goliath held the double flail in one huge hand and the suspect mattock in the other, the hammer's head resting in his left palm.

For once, the man didn't say a word before gently tossing the mattock to Cephas. Instinctively, Cephas reached up and caught it. Instantly, he was borne back down by its incredible weight.

It was not a prop, then.



When Shaneerah realized the younger dwarf was not drawing in his little book, but was instead chanting something written in its pages, she thought for an instant that she could stop whatever plot was underway. She believed beyond the shadow of a doubt that the dwarf could cut her down sword to sword, but if he was casting some sort of spell, he was distracted.

The span of time from realization, to decision, to action, was less than the time it would take her to say Azad's name, and her sword cleared its sheath almost as soon as the dwarf's first syllable reached her ears.

She was not nearly as fast as Legate Arnskull.

The old man, his eyes not rheumy at all, but as clear and blue as an autumn sky, stood leaning against the wall of the hewn cavern. The dwarf's deliberate raising of his twin silver

canes matched Shaneerah’s desperate grasp for her sword, but then he bested her in the way he twisted their handles together, the silver flowing away to reveal rich, ancient wood curved back on itself into the form of a greatbow. The dwarf had no need to string the bow, because a glowing thread joined the two ends of the magical weapon. The dwarf held an arrow, tipped with glinting silver and fletched with scarlet feathers, and he spoke to her while he seated it against his golden bowstring.

“He will be only a moment,” he said, speaking the common trade tongue with a Northern accent. “Then we will leave you in more peace than you deserve.”

Shaneerah considered her chances of landing a blow against the chanting dwarf before the bowman could draw and release, but she dismissed the idea even as the chanting stopped.

“So you don’t speak a half-dozen dialects of the Elemental tongue like your fellow, eh?” she asked the bowman.

The old man didn’t answer, instead just indicating that she should step to the side so the bondsman, sword again in hand, could step past her and lean against the wall beside him.

“He doesn’t even speak Dwarvish,” the bondsman said, then made a clicking noise that could not have come from tongue and teeth.

Behind her in the chamber, then from the recesses across the canyon, and in the other stations around the curve of the mote, Shaneerah heard the familiar sound of the cables releasing. She had never heard all of them released at once.

Shadows swirled around the dwarves, and they were gone.



It was a day full of madness, so perhaps Azad had simply lost his mind and ordered the canvas to fall away, expecting Cephas to fight this secret ally in midair.

The goliath lurched forward and grasped Cephas and the mattock. Unmindful of the plunge they were starting, he said, “I think you would have figured out a way to use the hammer. You are a wonderful fighter, Cephas.”

The noise of the crowd was lost to the blowing of the canyon wind, and the last of the sun’s rays receded above Cephas as he fell. He kicked clear of the canvas, of Jazeerijah, and of his whole old life.

He fell. Free.

CHAPTER FOUR

You are wise to realize you must trust me.
You are wise to find this terrifying.
—"The Marid's Bargain"
The Founding Stories of Calimshan

AND HE ROSE UP, ON GIANT WINGS.

Cephas had heard the cries of wyverns on the night wind before. He'd even once seen the silhouette of a flight of the dragonlike predators against clouds lit up by Selûne's glow. But he had certainly never found himself sprawled across one's back as it soared through the sky.

The goliath was there with him, seated in a leather saddle encircling the wyvern's sinuous torso. He shouted, but not at Cephas. "Trill!" he said. "Oh, what a bit of timing that was. Mattias will be proud!"

Cephas had a vague impression of ground rushing by far below at tremendous speed. He could not see much beyond the goliath's broad back and the rise and fall of gigantic, batlike wings. I wonder if that's not for the best, he thought.

The goliath closed a hand around Cephas's belt and hauled him around. Cephas found himself astride the beast, in front of his recent opponent.

"Look here, Cephas," said the goliath. "Your flight from captivity is a flight, indeed. Trill plucked us from the air as if she were taking a brace of fat game birds! But without the killing and the rending. That would be no good, eh?"

Cephas pieced together the disjointed flashes that made up his recollection of the last few moments. The fall was interrupted when a shadow closed over him, and then a huge claw closed *around* him, rolled skyward, and tossed him clear, before a gentle landing behind the goliath on the wyvern's back.

He gathered enough wits to answer the goliath's question. "Yes, I'm glad we weren't killed or … rent. I wish you had given me a bit more of a warning about what was going to happen, friend…."

"Tobin!" said the goliath, and the wyvern answered this lusty declaration with a high, ululating call that explained her own name. "I am Tobin Tok Tor, clanned now to Nightfeather's Circus of Wonders, but born of stone in the Dragonsword Mountains, half a world from here. I am happy to know you, Cephas, and would have told you the canvas would fall and that Trill was on the wing, had I known these things for the telling."

Cephas had a clearer view of the world around him now that he was upright. The mountains and canyon were black below them, but the stars were coming out, and at this height the sun was still just visible, low in the west. The wyvern carried them sunward, angling her flight down with the gradual slope of the mountains.

"You did not know that the canvas would fall?" asked Cephas, aloud. To himself, he thought, Don't look down, don't look down, over and over. But he managed to keep his voice calm, and asked further, "What was the original plan?"

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Tobin. “Did Shan and Cynda say there was a plan? For their way of saying, I mean?”

Shan, Cynda, Tobin, Trill. Cephas memorized the names. “They said, rather, they *told* me that I would meet you, and that we would fight, but only as a dumb show for the crowd. That my escape would follow on that.”

“Yes!” said Tobin. “I suppose that *is* a plan. Though really not much of one if you think about it.”

“You came to the mote, convinced the freedmen to let you fight a match, and went out onto the canvas, knowing it was all a ruse to help me escape. But you did not know how it was to work?”

Tobin thumped Cephas on the back, as if congratulating the smaller man for some great revelation. “Yes!” he said again, and again, the wyvern echoed him. “That is how these things usually go. The twins and Mattias, they write these things out, you know? We huddle with Corvus and scratch pictures in the ground and count out the beats of songs.”

“I don’t understand,” said Cephas, and added to himself, *Any* of this!

Tobin said, “I mean like the time in Nathlekh City when we had to learn all those verses of ‘The Lonely Hunt.’

“ ‘Don’t look back
Just draw your blade’

and Shan pushes the crate into the alley so that it hits the wagon bed on ‘blade’ and

‘Down dark track
The kill is made’

and that’s the cue for Corvus, of course, darkness and killing, but he was just to mimic the watch’s alert whistles and stir up some of his shadows, and

‘Don’t shout out yet
Just follow the cries’

and Mattias looses a flaming arrow and ‘whoosh’ the crates go up before the coster guards have even turned around. See, I *can* remember all those things; it’s just not my way of doing. Though I do like that song very much.”

Cephas decided it likely he would see Shan and Cynda soon, and also meet this Mattias, who was somehow connected to the wyvern, and also a Corvus, who Tobin had said had a way with killing. He decided that even if it were the mute halflings explaining, he would better understand them than he did this cheerful goliath.

Cephas asked, “What *is* your way of doing, friend, if it is not to plan and sing, or—forgive me—to fight?”

“Oh, you do not have to ask for forgiveness, Cephas. I know I am not a true warrior—that is why I left the mountains, partly. And as for the planning, well, the others know that improvisation is the center of my art.”

Improvisation was something that Shaneerah had taught Cephas to avoid.

“And what is your art, friend Tobin?”

Cephas felt the goliath straighten in the saddle before he answered. “I,” said the giant, with enormous dignity, “am a clown.”



They were the last of the circus to leave the mote, but Corvus and Mattias returned to the wagons long before the others by means of the kenku’s rituals.

Corvus was not surprised to find the facade of his private wagon lowered on its chains so that it formed a platform facing away from the camp’s central bonfire. If the roustabouts had not followed his orders to lower the false wall, he and Mattias would still be on the mote, facing the

Memnonar gladiator woman with their magical disguises fading around them.

“ ‘More peace than you deserve,’ ” Corvus said, adding just a touch of melodrama to his imitation of Mattias. The kenku hopped off the platform and extended his arm to his friend. “Always a moral, isn’t there?”

The ranger waved him off, parting the sorcerous joins that made a greatbow of his canes and already scanning the sky. “Better always than never,” said Mattias. “Trill will want feeding when she gets here—especially if she carries both of them the whole way down the canyon.”

Corvus waited for Mattias to leave before performing his habitual check of the magical circle inscribed on the platform. Given enough time, Corvus could transport himself to this circle from anywhere in the world. He had even read of ways to travel to and from circles inscribed in other worlds altogether, but his growing ambitions and elaborate schemes had not yet taken him beyond the mortal realm.

Against that day, though, Corvus crafted his personal circle with great care, describing its area with inlaid jet and setting the symbols of power as mosaics of onyx, black pearls, and silver. Every wagon in the circus train held its own secret treasures, but there was no greater concentration of wealth and power among the circus folk’s traveling homes than this circle.

That is how an outsider would have judged things. For Corvus, the tools and materials on the workbench he went to inside the wagon were far more valuable, and while their power was subtle, it was vast. The bench was laden with carefully arranged pots of glue, a lump of wax bristling with needles, and a number of keen knives. A framework of wooden dowels held a sheaf of vellum, which, midway through the process of binding, contained a half-dozen signatures.

Others in the circus considered their ringmaster’s habit of mending old books a hobby, but Corvus thought of the work

as more than that. Hobbies were a layman’s way of killing time, and Corvus was no layman at killing anything.



Shan and Cynda moved as fast as they could while maintaining a hunter’s silence, pacing each other through the dry washes and boulder fields of the canyon floor. The sisters made it off the mote just as Corvus’s plot played out. The bridges fell with the canvas, but neither of the women believed the bandits and their goblin allies would be trapped above the canyon for long. The Calishite leader’s screams, incoherent with rage, made it clear that armed scouts would spread out, though the chance of any of them tracking the twins, much less overtaking them, was small. Mattias Farseer had schooled them well in the ways of wilderness travel, and if by some chance they did encounter trouble, well, they had been deadly fighters even before they joined the circus.

Cynda possessed the sharper sense of hearing. The long-haired twin stopped in front of her sister and raised a cautioning hand, but Shan saw that she smiled. She waited for the explanation she knew Cynda would offer.

When the reason came, it was just a finger pointed to the air, and a hand cupped around an ear. A moment later, Shan heard it, too—singing, from the sky.

The women gazed up at a familiar shadow passing swiftly beneath the stars. Trill flew low, carrying passengers making no effort at silence.

Cynda’s grin grew wider, but Shan shook her head. She shared her sister’s deep affection for the goliath, but she wasn’t as quick to forgive his lapses of discipline.

Shan reached back and felt the contents of her pack again, seeking reassurance of their success. The book had proved easy to retrieve. Corvus would be pleased.



From the air, the roadside camp of Nightfeather's Circus of Wonders appeared as a constellation of flickering orange stars drawing the shape of an eye on the plain below. A half-dozen campfires spread out in an irregular oval, encircling a larger central bonfire.

As Trill descended, Cephas saw that there were peculiar wagons parked around the various fires. They were roughly the same size as the wagons merchants sometimes brought to Jazeerijah, but, instead of being open to the sky or covered in canvas, these were constructed so that walls and roofs enclosed their beds. They reminded Cephas of his cell.

"Look," said Tobin, pointing to one fire at the edge of the camp. "There is Mattias, ready with your supper, Trill!"

The wyvern's answering call carried no hint of threat. In fact, she sounded happy.

Cephas heard shouts of welcome rise up from around the various campfires. The people at this circus were used to a wyvern swooping low over their camp by night.

The man standing beside the fire where they landed did not call out a greeting, at least not any that Cephas detected. But the wyvern seemed to respond to some unheard voice as she dipped one wing to allow Cephas and Tobin to slide off her back. In a single leap she bounded across the space lit by the fire, and the old man raised one hand to scratch the scaly frills around her eyes. Cephas could hear that the man was speaking aloud now. "That's my girl," he said.

Two carcasses—mountain goats by their size—lay dressed and cleaned on the wooden surface of a table. At an invisible signal from the man, Trill lifted one up in her huge jaws and threw her neck back, her head bobbing in time to the sound of cracking bones and satisfied smacks.

Without warning, Cephas's vision grew indistinct, filling up with the flickering oranges and yellows of the fire, but fading to black at the edges. The flames danced in time to the

rhythm that hijacked Cephas's awareness. Dimly, he understood that the beating sound was not that of Trill devouring her meal, but the hypnotic pulse he'd first heard the day before. The earth is making music again, he thought.

It was like the sound that came when he was at the ragged edge in the arena, when his heartbeat filled his ears with the sound of blood rushing through his veins. And it was also the sound of the earth beneath his feet, the sound of rock and soil and sand. The sound of the earth was one and the same as the sound of Cephas's heart.



When he was able to open his eyes, the light was steadier. The feel of the air was not that of the open night, and the planked ceiling made Cephas think for a moment that he was back in his suspended cell.

But he'd never had an oil lamp in his cell, of course, and he lay on a cot, not on the bare floor. He started to sit up, but his vision swam and he leaned back.

"I won't say you've been ill-used. You were a slave, and that goes without saying."

Cephas did not recognize the smooth voice, and could not guess what the sounds that accompanied it meant—the clink of metal on stone or ceramic; the pouring of water.

"But I must say, the extraordinary lengths Azad went to to deny you your heritage are cruel, even by the degenerate standards of your homeland."

A figure walked into his field of vision. Grinta the Pike's descriptions of the world's peoples were short on any details that didn't concern fighting, but he remembered that crow-headed men were called kenkus. He even remembered what Grinta said the best tactic to use against them was.

To run.

“You’ve spent enough time with Tobin that you’ll have learned my name, and that of our concern—and a good deal else, I imagine. But to see to the formalities, I am Corvus Nightfeather, and you are resting on my bed, in my wagon, in the fellowship of the road that we call Nightfeather’s Circus of Wonders. Welcome, Cephas.”

Nothing in Cephas’s experience taught him how to respond to that word, “welcome.” But he’d heard it in stories, and he knew generally what it meant. He knew that it sometimes concealed unseen dangers. But the response was the same even then. “A thousand blessings on this house,” he said.

The kenku solved the mystery of the earlier sounds by extending an ebony, three-fingered hand holding a steaming mug. He laughed as he did so.

“Excellent. Mattias said the slavers kept up the tradition of reading from the Founding Stories. It’s good that you listened. Yes, that’s very good.”

Cephas accepted the cup—it was warm to the touch—and sniffed its contents. The color and scent of whatever brew it contained were unlike anything he’d ever had on Jazeerijah.

“It’s a tincture of dried leaves in hot water,” said Corvus. “And you’ve already had that much of it and more, so don’t worry that we’re trying to poison you. You probably notice that you feel a bit calmer than you should under such strange circumstances—we gave it to you to settle you down when you fell into your reverie outside.”

“The music …” said Cephas, realizing that he could still hear the steady beat but that it was distant, muted.

“Music, yes, that’s what you said it sounded like. That you actually *hear* the earth. That’s the heritage I mentioned a moment ago, Cephas. That’s one of the things the Calishites were keeping from you—besides your freedom, I mean.”

“ ‘Heritage,’ ” said Cephas. “Is that the same as ‘lineage’? As in the story about the fisherman and the stern woman of the sea?”

Corvus laughed again. “ ‘Stern woman,’ ” he said, and Cephas heard his own voice in the repetition, a perfect rendering. “I’d forgotten old Kamar’s puritan streak. Unusual in despots, really, at least in his day. But yes, in the version of the tale he had his scribes include in the book Azad read from, Umberlee is called the stern woman. I hope you won’t be too scandalized if you ever make it to a seaport and hear her own priests call her the Bitch Queen.”

Cephas risked a sip from the cup. The tincture was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. He was too distracted by the sensation to respond to Corvus.

“Heritage, lineage,” Corvus continued. “Yes, they are close to the same thing. But lineage speaks to direct ancestry, as in your story, when Umberlee reveals to Kassam that he is the son of the pasha. Heritage is more general—it has to do with the gifts all men are given by the circumstances of their birth. Tobin’s great strength, for example, is his heritage as a goliath. Part of my heritage”—Cephas looked up from the cup, because the voice he heard was that of the gigantic clown—“is my talent for imitating voices.” The liquid tones Corvus used earlier in the conversation returned. “The music you hear from the ground, the way you can interact with the earth. Along with the golden bands on your skin, that’s part of your heritage as a genasi. An earthsouled genasi, in particular.”

Cephas absorbed this, recalling that the kenku used that word for him in welcome, and recalling something else, besides.

“She was lying, though,” Cephas said.

Corvus cocked his head again, in the other direction. “Who was lying, Cephas?”

“The stern woman, your Umberlee Bitch Queen. She told Kassam the Fisherman that he was Pasha Mujen’s son, but it was a trick. When he went to the court to claim his inheritance, the pasha’s vizar whipped him all the way back to the docks, and the blood from his wounds turned the

waters of the bay red. That’s what the stern woman wanted—Kassam’s blood for her scheme to drive the fish away from the pasha’s waters.”

“I’m sure you’ve found that real life does not always follow the way of the stories,” Corvus said. Shouts sounded from outside the wagon. “The twins have returned,” he said. “Let’s see if Tobin and the roustabouts have fixed you a place by the campfire yet.”



By “a place,” Corvus meant a wooden platform that, while clearly assembled with some haste, looked much like the boardwalks and low tables to which the Calishites confined him. Unlike those on Jazeerijah, this one was piled high with pillows and cushions. And while many of the men and women gathered around the bonfire were armed, they all greeted Cephas with broad smiles and calls of “Well met!” and “Welcome!”

Cephas was about to step down from the back of Corvus’s wagon when Tobin appeared at his side. “Here now, Cephas,” said the goliath. “Let’s not have you falling again. Corvus says you must be careful of the ground until you learn to sing back to it.” With that, Tobin picked Cephas up, took two long strides across the camp, and dropped him among the pillows on the fireside platform.

The phrase “a bit calmer than usual” did not begin to describe Cephas’s ease of mind after drinking the tincture. He had not even flinched when Tobin hoisted him over his shoulder. Through the pleasant haze he thought, Drink nothing else the kenku offers.

Most of the people in the firelight were humans, with a few in the number who might have benefitted from some of Grinta’s kin in their “heritage.” One by one, they approached as Tobin introduced them. Cephas was too used to avoiding even the appearance of friendship with anyone

other than Grinta to do more than nod in response. He hoped that the few names he'd managed to learn already would serve him for at least a little while longer.

Two such came into his hearing. "And here are Shan and Cynda, whom you met in the canyon, yes?" said Tobin. "But they are more than just adventurers, see? They are aerialists."

Cephas remembered Tobin's talk of the twins and their wire. "Your fighting technique," he said to the women, "it uses garrotes?"

The sister with the shorter hair—Shan?—gave him a confused look and walked over to join Corvus in the shadows at one end of his wagon. The other—yes, Cephas felt sure the one with long hair and a ready grin was Cynda, so the other must be Shan—poked Tobin in the ribs and slapped her knee, miming laughter. Both women were travel stained and weary, but Cynda insisted, by means of a quick series of hand motions that the others of the circus clearly understood, on demonstrating for Cephas's benefit what an aerialist was.

Someone brought a thin beam of wood, the size and shape of two quarterstaffs joined end to end, and gave it to Tobin. "Usually we stretch a wire between two poles, and it is much higher," Tobin explained. "Cynda just wants to show you that she's even better at acrobatics than she is at swordplay. Circus performers"—Tobin shrugged—"love unsophisticated audiences."

Cephas made no reply. If he had anything to say, it would have been lost in the cheer the others raised, anyway.

Tobin set one end of the long staff on the ground next to the bonfire and held the other against his shoulder. Cephas lost sight of Cynda, but then she came tumbling through the flames, arms and legs stretched out so that her lithe body paralleled the ground. She tucked her head in and rolled in midair, bringing her bare feet around to land on the end of the staff just as Tobin pulled down on its other end with all

his might, using his shoulder as the fulcrum of a makeshift catapult.

Cynda flew so high that Cephas lost sight of her again, this time because she was above the nimbus of light cast by the fire. When he spotted her, plummeting back down, straight toward him and staring him directly in the eye, he hurried to roll out of the way, forgetful of any need to stay on the platform.

He stopped when he saw the end of the staff swing around. Tobin held it across both shoulders like the burden staves the kitchen slaves of Jazeerijah used to haul two pails of water at once. Cynda reached out with one hand as she fell, caught the staff, and swung in a circle all the way around in a move that ended with her standing easily atop the narrow pole, hands in her pockets.

The crowd laughed and whistled. With a start, Cephas realized this was the first night he'd ever heard cheering that didn't include calls for blood.

Cynda bowed, bending nearly double but maintaining her balance atop the staff, which Tobin kept still and solid as rock. She grasped the wood between her feet and brought her legs up into the air until she attained a position exactly opposite that from which she started. Then, in a display of steadiness and strength that Cephas would never have expected from so small a woman, she lifted one hand and held it out to her side, holding her whole weight above her as she scissored her legs back and forth in an elegant dance in the air.

For a moment, it seemed that her weight was too much for that single arm, because Cynda bent her elbow, but it became clear the collapse was by design. Her long locks of chestnut hair spilled around her face as she brought her lips close enough to the wood to give it a cheeky kiss, before she extended her arm straight again with sufficient strength to launch clear of the makeshift "aerialist" stage. Tobin must have anticipated the move, because he angled the staff

back down, and when the halfling woman completed the arc of her last leap, she landed on the narrow ramp, ending her performance in a relaxed, languorous pose, reclining against the staff, legs crossed before her as if she simply warmed her toes by the fire.

Cephas joined the thunderous applause that the other members of the circus offered Cynda. The halfling acknowledged them all with a gesture, then turned to offer her own applause to Tobin, who waved her and the others off. “I only held a stick; it is nothing.”

“It was a great display of strength, my friend,” said Corvus, who joined them. Shan was nowhere to be seen, her place at the kenku’s side taken by the old man, Mattias. “Done with just the right amount of flair and finesse, as ever.” Corvus turned to Cephas.

“Tobin is our circus strongman. He is expert at making the audience believe that the things that are easy for him are difficult, and that the things that are difficult for him are easy. Come to think of it, that’s a pretty good description of all our roles.”

Cephas appreciated the goliath’s extraordinary strength, especially after having faced him on the canvas, but asked, “Is a strongman a sort of clown?”

Tobin opened his mouth to speak, but Corvus held up a single taloned finger that silenced him. Even in his relaxed state, Cephas noticed that all the people of the circus grew quiet when the kenku raised his hand.

“Why yes, in fact,” said Corvus. “Just as Tobin’s performance offered us an example describing what all of us *do*, that word, ‘clown’—and oh, it’s an old one, Cephas, as old as any story Azad yi Calimport ever read—that word describes what most of us *are*. It’s a supple word. Though what Tobin meant when he told you he was a clown means something very particular. Something, alas, that he has yet to find the opportunity to master, given the demands of the road.”

Tobin blushed, looking anywhere but at Cephas. A kind-faced man, thin and wiry, stood and thumped Tobin on the back. “Here now, boss,” he said, “you know we’ve taken the big fellow as our ’prentice. And we all heard you tell him he could leave off bending steel and juggling village elders if he could find his own replacement.”

This time Tobin did speak, even though he made an unconvincing attempt at a whisper. “Quiet now, Whitey,” he said. “Please?”

Every eye turned to Cephas. Mattias spoke, looking at Cephas but directing his question to the kenku ringmaster. “You’ll try to claim you didn’t have this in mind, I suppose?”

Corvus appraised Cephas the same way that Cephas often did his opponents, measuring width of shoulder and deepness of chest, trying to gauge how hard the coming blows would fall. “I did not,” Corvus said to Mattias. “This is just another happy coincidence. Another wonder to delight all those good folk whose delight earns us our bread and wine.”

Mattias appeared unconvinced, but it was only Cephas who saw the old man’s expression, because everyone else gathered around Tobin and talked at once. They were congratulating the goliath on his new role, and the huge man was so overcome with joy that he began to cry.

Tears of joy; this was yet another new thing in a day full of them. And even though his instincts told him it was too soon to trust these people, there was only one thing to say when Tobin bent down and crushed him in a delighted hug.

“How much,” asked Cephas, “does a village elder weigh?”



Even here, alone and hidden from the view of any possible observers by far stronger shields than just the closed shutters of his wagon, Corvus took care to make it appear that he plucked the quill from his own heart feathers. He

made a sound—a gasp of pain—and mimed a flinch to indicate the shock of pulling a living feather out by its root. Corvus practiced this little deception even now, this late, when the only people in the camp awake to appreciate the performance were those who had drawn the watch, who knew better than to disturb him, and Trill, whom he knew better than to disturb.

The quill, which he summoned with a mental command from the magical storehouse Mattias called his “nest,” did not come from a kenku, even though Corvus conceded that its oily black color and fanned plume were close enough to fool the inexperienced. Corvus remembered what he’d overheard Tobin tell the genasi while he was taking Shan’s wordless report. “ ‘Circus performers love unsophisticated audiences,’ ” he whispered, and for once he did not bother to use any voice but his own, a clear sign that he was alone.

Like lineage and heritage, sophistication and experience were close enough to the same thing for the purposes Corvus had for the young earthsouled genasi. Or the lad’s lack of them was, at any rate.

As he cut his own pen, so, too, had Corvus ground and formulated his own ink. The glass bottle he stored it in held no special distinction he knew of, beyond being perhaps two thousand years old and a shade of blue Corvus found pleasing; however, the ink’s ingredients would have earned him a small fortune from more than one wizard or ritualcaster—not to mention a life’s sentence or a headsman’s axe from any number of governments, depending on local laws.

He picked up the pen and dipped it into the ink. Opening his prized book to a certain page, he began scribing words that disappeared as soon as they were written.

Exalted Pasha, he wrote, *your humble servant makes, herewith, a report on the progress of our shared venture....*



The words, inked in blood and powdered metals, faded. Their meaning did not. Corvus's pen moved, and his message took flight, launching into the night sky of a shadowy mirror world of magic. Seeking purchase, the words were drawn to a page twin to the one that cast them away.

Drawn to a page far to the south.

The message flew away from the shadow of the circus, where only their writer was distinct among the half-seen forms of his companions. The wagons, in the real world, were circled in the shadow of the Omlarandins; here, the mountains did not cast shadows, but *were* shadows. Creatures of fell magic lairing in the peaks caught the scent of mortal sorcery, but the message flew too fast for their interest to grow into threats.

South and south, the message flew. Down the long Ithal Pass, where analogues of worldly human churches showed themselves as gigantic black hands radiating the fear and power of their inhabitants, servants of the Black God Bane. The Banites, mortal and immortal alike, let the message pass unmolested.

In the remnants of the Forest of Mir, a dimly lit woodland stretching between spires of stone to its north and a petrified swamp to its south, a three-horned dragon stirred but did not rouse from his century-long sleep for the scant temptations offered by communications between tiny souls who walked on two legs.

The Alimir Mountains were higher and sharper than the peaks in the North, concealing alien threats. The message arced downward, gaining in speed as it ended the flight that had taken only the time it took to scratch out the words.

In the last human city of what was once the oldest human nation on the continent, Corvus's words marched across a sheet of parchment stretched between clamps fashioned of magical fire. As the brief passage revealed itself, the flames

emitted an invisible stream of smoke that smelled first of cedar, then of sandalwood.

A tall, powerfully built man stopped speaking when the scent drifted across his richly appointed receiving room. He stood up from the throne where he rested, and with a sweep of his hand, indicated that the three genasi attending him should do likewise.

Two men, with fire dancing about their heads and skins colored gold, and one woman, a silver-skinned beauty who did not merely stand but flew up from her couch, exchanged wary glances as they followed their host. The WeavePasha of Almraiven was not only the leader of his people, but he was also the Caleph Arcane of the oldest guild of wizards in the world. The various objects that crowded his private rooms bore the appearance of works of art, mechanical apparatuses, and decorative plants. The two firesouled men and the windsouled woman knew that every item concealed deadly magic. It was best to follow the WeavePasha's steps exactly.

The place he led them was not so impressive. The older of the two firesouled, a wizard of no small power, sniffed. "You interrupt our discussions to consult a toy, Acham el Jhotos?"

If the WeavePasha recognized the insult implicit in the man's use of his given name, he gave no sign. The younger firesouled smirked at this weakness, but the silver woman hanging a few inches above the floor gave a slight shake of her head at his misreading. This human ruler would not be drawn out by the petty games of her fellows.

"I have interrupted our discussions, child, to receive a message of great import to all of us," the WeavePasha said, and though the firesouled magician bristled, he dared not protest, because the WeavePasha had earned his powers over a very long time.

The wizard passed a hand before the parchment and what was written there disappeared, the ink of the letters flowing

in a liquid stream down the page, into a shallow bowl of jade set below.

“My spy has found the lost heir of Calimport.”



In his wagon, Corvus watched the last word fade from the page that was simultaneously bound in his journey book and in a workbook of the WeavePasha of Almraiven.

Then he turned to another page. Taking up his quill again, he penned a very similar message, meant for a very different reader.

CHAPTER FIVE

Knowledge of the sword is useless without knowledge of the world.
—"The First Trader's Unsalable Wares"
The Founding Stories of Calimshan

AT DAWN, CEPHAS STOOD ON THE DRIVER'S BOARD OF a wagon, watching Corvus and a heavyset woman called Wagonmistress Melda scratch converging lines in the dirt with silver rods. Mattias waited next to the ringmaster's wagon and explained the ritual.

"See how the road they draw recedes into the distance where all the lines come together? That's a draftsman's trick, and the wise know there's as much magic in it as in any of Corvus's toys and chants."

Cephas nodded. Jazeerijah possessed little in the way of art, beyond the decorative flourishes worked into the deadlier armaments and most effective pieces of armor. He glanced down at the satchels stowed below the driver's board, gifts from Tobin. They held the flail and piecemeal scale he'd brought with him out of captivity.

“Now Melda is pouring trails of residuum from their sketched road on the ground before her team. They always take the lead.” The woman retreated from the network of lines Corvus muttered over, walking backward and letting a stream of glittering dust flow from a leather pouch in her hands. When she reached a pair of oxen, placidly chewing their cud in the traces of a wagon plainer than most of the others, she straightened and pulled the drawstring of the pouch tight.

“What she’s got in her pouch there might be worth as much as what you’re so anxious to keep hidden away beneath Corvus’s bench,” said Mattias. He no longer watched the ritual, looking at Cephas. “Nobody here is going to take those pretties from you, Cephas.”

Cephas, flustered, focused on Corvus. At first, nothing happened as the kenku finished whatever magic he was working. But then the weeds in front of Melda’s team of oxen flattened. More than that, twin paths spread out before the imperturbable beasts, parallel to each other and just broad enough for the oxen to easily walk along. Boulders shifted and frost-heaved ground smoothed itself, as a new road led away from the more mundane track they camped beside.

The trade road led north and south. The ritual-wrought trail led west, away from the sunrise across a highland plain still cloaked in night.



The wagon train moved slowly, even with the benefit of the trail magically breaking before them. Corvus explained, “It just smoothes out the rough bits so we’re less likely to break a wheel or, worse, lose one of the oxen or horses to a broken leg. I don’t know the trick of grading real roads with spellwork.”

“It seems a great work to me,” Cephas said.

Corvus laughed. “Not so great. And temporary. This path closes behind us just as it opens before us. In fact, whoever is in the last wagon might be bushwhacking if they’ve fallen behind.”

Cephas thought that unlikely. The atmosphere among the members of the circus was as far removed from the grimness of Shaneerah’s training grounds as he could imagine, but the troop was no less disciplined. Corvus, though he never touched the reins, kept his wagon a uniform distance from the one in front of them, and when the trail swept around a hill or copse more easily avoided than navigated, Cephas could see that the same precision held true all up and down the line. The wagon train moved like a highly skilled team of gladiators tasked to fight a common foe.

The common foe, in this case, was the long distance that lay between them and a place called Argentor, and Corvus’s desire that they make the journey with as much haste and as much secrecy as two such conflicting demands allowed.

The second requirement, secrecy, kept Trill in her wagon. Mattias Farseer’s companion had her own place in the train, a wagon pulled by a double pair of oxen that wore feedbags over their noses stuffed with sweet-smelling herbs, and had blinders on their eyes. Cephas was surprised that the ranger would agree to have the wyvern confined in the wheeled cage he drove, but it soon became apparent that the bars of the wagon were not what they seemed. More than once, when he stood up on the seat of Corvus’s wagon to get a better view of the plain around him, Cephas spotted Trill’s wings spreading out *through* the bars or, with her tail twitching back and forth behind, extending out from the solid rear wall of the wagon, causing some small amount of trouble for the driver of the team behind.

“It’s illusory,” Corvus said, “and a constant source of grief. You’re right that Mattias wouldn’t allow her to be caged, even if she would consent to it. But there aren’t many people in this wide world who would permit us to transport

an unbound wyvern through their lands. Not even the elves back where Mattias and Trill came from."

"Elves," said Cephas, thinking of Grinta, his only previous source of information about the lands and peoples of Faerûn. "According to Grinta the orc, they are the apostate get of the Demon Lord Corellon and the Mother of All Squirrels. They cower behind trees and shoot arrows. Swing at their knees."

Corvus made a choking noise. "That's … one point of view, to be sure," he said. "I wish I'd known that the Calishites had such a sage of the free peoples as your Grinta secreted away in that canyon. I would have brought her out along with you."

The thought of Grinta left behind on Jazeerijah stung. Cephas had noticed that Corvus managed to find a way to deflect the question every time he'd asked so far, but he tried again. "Why did you bring *me* out?"

And as he had every time before, Corvus found a way to lead Cephas to another subject. "And yet this Grinta never told you about *you*, about the genasi and all their secrets of earth and fire and water. Yours is a strange race, Cephas, and there are few who could tell their tale with authority. Perhaps none with as much authority as the people we go to perform for next."

Cephas seized on this new information. "The people in Argentor know about genasi?" he asked.

Corvus said, "My friend, the people in Argentor *are* genasi. Earthsouled, all of them. A whole village of people just like you."



Their second night on the plain, Cephas sat atop the wagon, watching the circus pitch camp.

"I should help," he told Corvus, who puttered back in the recesses of the wagon. "I've listened to the earth for days now. I can keep from getting lost in it, I'm sure."

Corvus stuck his long beak through the beaded curtain that concealed his wagon's interior. "We'll make Argentor in three more nights, Cephas. The people there will be able to tell you how to control what you hear. And other things. Things you can do."

"I understand," said Cephas. "But look at Tobin and Whitey setting up that cursed stage for me to rest on like the pasha of Manshaka. I do not want to ... stand out."

Corvus came outside. He waved away Cephas's concerns. " 'The pasha of Manshaka,' you said." The kenku's voice was subdued. "What do you know of that place?"

Cephas shook his head. "It is just a place in the stories, some of them. The man who ruled there was as fat as a gelded boar and went about the city on a litter carried by four just men. One of the bearers fell in love with the pasha's daughter, and she disguised herself as a courtesan so she could smuggle a dagger of stone into the slave pens. He used this to free all the righteous among the gladiators of the Arenas of Blood."

"The *righteous* among them," Corvus said. "What about the unrighteous?"

Cephas shrugged. "They were left in the pens, I suppose—if there were any still alive at the end of that day's games. It is the righteous who prevail."

Corvus took a long look at Cephas, then called out into the hum of the camp. "Tobin!" he said. "Find Shan and have her bring me the copy of the *Book of Founding Stories* she and her sister bought in Innarlith."

The goliath, who had taken to wearing a silk shirt died yellow and red and festooned with dozens of bright flowers, smiled and waved. "The *Book of Founding Stories,"* he said. "Yes, Corvus."

"Tobin," called Corvus, interrupting the goliath's long strides across the camp. "The copy they bought at Innarlith. Make sure you tell Shan that in particular."

"Innarlith, right!" the goliath replied.

A moment later, Shan slid onto the bench between Corvus and Cephas, dropping down from the roof of the wagon behind them. She handed a worn leather-bound book to the kenku and waited, obviously curious.

“You’ve seen one much like this, Cephas?” asked Corvus.

The sight of the volume overwhelmed Cephas with memories of Jazeerijah; of Azad’s telling him he would never see the book again, never hear another of its stories. He spoke in a hushed tone. “This book was made on the order of Kamar yn Saban el Djenispool, the great human leader of all Calimshan in the … old days. It has the whole of the world in it.”

Cephas reached his hand out and Corvus let him take the volume. He studied the cover, tooled with a single character, tracing its slashes and curves with the tip of one finger. “But this is supposed to be silver, with a blue stone set in this place here.”

Corvus held out his hand and, after a moment’s hesitation, Cephas returned the book.

“Yes, well, Azad yi Calimport read from a different copy of the same book,” Corvus explained. “He was right that his book, like Shan’s and Cynda’s, was made by the scribes and binders of the Djenispool dynasty. That’s the mark there, which lost its silver foil long before it made its way to the Innarlith bookstalls, or our friends would have paid quite a bit more for it than they did. The books were made a long time ago, as humans count things.”

Corvus opened the book and turned the heavy parchment leaves. He stopped at a page that did not bear the lines of flowing script that covered most of the others, instead featuring a colorful drawing of a bold warrior brandishing a tulwar. The man stood with his back to the viewer in an endless landscape of red dunes, facing a giant with black horns and eyes of fire.

“See the red ink the engravers used for the sand? How bright it is? The Calimien print shops didn’t learn that trick

of the Shou until well after the start of the Ninth Imperial Age. And in fact, these books weren't made until the Year of the Broken Blade, about, oh, two hundred and twenty years ago. Kamar yn Saban commissioned their printing in celebration of his twenty-fifth year on the Caleph's throne. I've seen the pasha's written order, actually, though the precious-minded antiquarian who owned it at the time wouldn't let me touch it. The order called for one copy for every household in Calimshan. An impossible task, because in those days, the cities of the Shining Sea held *millions* of people. Still, the effort they made was enormous. There are almost no other books left from that time because almost none were printed—the Caleph's book used all the ink and parchment available between Baldur's Gate and the Shaar.

"It is a complicated thing, Cephas. The Caleph said he wanted every child in Calimshan to know the truth of the past. But when he said 'every child,' he meant one in perhaps twenty, because then, as now, most of the people in Calimshan were slaves. And then, as now, slaves weren't counted. Especially not their children. As for what he meant by 'truth,' well, what do any of us mean by that?

"But tens of thousands of these books were made, and distributed without expectation of payment in every city of what we now call the Skyfire Emirates. I think it was the finest single act any leader of those tortured lands has ever undertaken."

Cephas was studying the illustration; Shan took the book from Corvus and held it where he could see it more clearly. Cephas asked, "This is meant to be Daud yn Daud? Facing the Cinderlord?"

Shan nodded, and Cephas said, "Only a fool would use a sword like that. It's no wonder he lost." Shan nodded again.

Cephas indicated that she should close the book. "And this mark here means Djenispool?"

Corvus said, "It is one way of writing a D, which is the first letter in the word 'Djenispool.' "

“There is more than one mark for the same letter?”

“There are a thousand kinds of beings who use writing on this world and those that border it, and they’re divided into untold nations and tribes. They use dozens of scripts to render hundreds of languages. Different marks for *D* and *S*, for all the sounds.”

Cephas stared at Corvus, feeling as much tension as he ever did in combat. He said, “Show me.”

And over the next days, rolling across the Tethyrian highlands, Corvus began to do just that.



The Omlarandin Mountains disappeared over the eastern horizon, and the world emptied of any features but grass, thistle, and the occasional lone tree. A day after the circus crossed the gravel track of the Pass Ride, Corvus sent scouts out from the wagon train.

Shan and Cynda disappeared into the prairie, while Mattias and Trill disappeared into the sky.

Cephas asked Tobin about the twins, and the big man told him not to worry. “Those women, they come and go, Shan more than Cynda. They are like you—they learned to make an act of what they knew already. They do Corvus’s special work most times.”

For his part, Cephas kept a heavy schedule, being tutored by Corvus with his books as they traveled and by Tobin in the strongman’s art while they camped at night. Mattias and Corvus still worried that he was too careless about taking short trips across the bare ground, but the heavy rope-soled sandals Cynda found for him muted the siren call of the plain.

That evening beside the bonfire at the center of camp, Cephas found himself struggling to remember what it had been like to inhabit his cramped cell every day. He had no problem recalling the arena. He returned to attempting to

make his arms and shoulders tremble while lifting a feather-light load.

Mattias sat on his haunches nearby, Trill's dozing head at one hand and a wooden bucket of water at the other. He dipped a stiff-bristled brush in the bucket, then pulled the wyvern's upper lip back with his other hand. Trill had made short work of the half-dozen tom turkeys the wagon train scared up during the day. Feathers and gore were stuck between her long, sharp teeth. She let out an occasional low rumble as Mattias scrubbed away at the deadly set of fangs, but never stirred enough to open an eyelid.

"We'll see the Spires first thing tomorrow," Mattias said.

The ranger peered into his bucket and stirred it a bit before deciding it was still clean enough for another tooth or two.

"I haven't traveled the Suretmarch in thirty years," he said. "But the situation has not changed in all that time. For someone who says the best chance of heaven is a life lived beneath the notice of the gods, Corvus, you've managed to steer a narrow course between people who will take stern exception to that view should we fall into their hands."

Corvus stood and picked up Mattias's pail, walked to the edge of the firelight, and poured it out. The ranger gathered his canes and started to rise to refill it, but Corvus motioned him down. Whitey came and took the bucket and disappeared in the direction of the casks that held the communal water supply.

"A course *between* these godly people, though," Corvus said, sitting back down. "As was my intention. Other than crossing two roads and seeing a single barley field gone fallow for three or four years, we haven't seen a single sign of intelligent life in days."

"That's because you spend all day with Cephas!" said Tobin. The goliath punctuated this by drawing a tin bugle from the pocket of his voluminous polka-dotted pants and sounding a long, discordant note.

Trill perked up, ready for fight or flight, but when she saw that Mattias was laughing, she settled back down.

“Funny,” Cephas said. He wasn’t offended. Tobin needed to practice making jokes so he could get better at it.

“This course wasn’t a hard one,” said Melda. “But the brothers at Barakmordin are close.”

“And the queens of Tethyr has pointed those holy fools down Ithal Pass at the Banites like a spear for a hundred years,” said Mattias. “Knights of the Platinum Dragon, Tormite soldier priests, and the Crying God’s martyrs, all vying to outdo one another in zealotry and mounting three sorties of heavy cavalry down the Pass Ride every single day. How we managed to cross at a time they wouldn’t spot us is beyond me.”

“Time and place,” said Melda.

“As it happens,” said Corvus, “the records I examined in Saradush make me believe that the earthsouled we’re visiting in the Spires are themselves a holy order of sorts. Or they were the last time anyone bothered to record them in the annals of the Shining Helm Herald.”

The Calishites of Jazeerijah had kept no cults—Corvus claimed this was a product of their enslaved backgrounds, though he did not explain why so few in the circus were worshipful sorts. But the only reading primer to be found among the haphazard collection of volumes the troop carried with them was a slim child’s book of the gods that Mattias had produced without explanation.

In his slow journey through the book so far, Cephas had learned who Bane and Bahamut the Platinum Dragon were, and if Torm and Ilmater were allied, that gave him a general sense of what their followers must be like. He hoped the earthsouled leaned more toward the teachings of the folk Mattias termed “zealots” than they did the faith of the Black God.

“They don’t worship a god, precisely,” Corvus said. “Grumbar the Earthlord is my guess. Or, if these folks are of

a poetic turn of mind, the King of the Land Below the Roots. He's an elemental lord, which is supposed to be something different than a god. Don't ask me to explain the difference, though, because I've never found a satisfactory explanation, and not for want of trying."

Tobin stood, and Cephas wondered what sort of apprentice humor they would be subjected to next.

"He watches and guards," said Tobin, and the whole company quieted and turned to look at the goliath. Even Trill opened her eyes and raised her great head, cocking it sideways as if she heard a faraway call for help from a companion long lost.

"He keeps the treasures of the earth's crust secret and holds them in trust for the landwalkers. He bears burdens and does not complain. He pronounces and is not questioned. Air blows away, water flows away, fire burns away, Earth stays. He abides. He endures."

Tobin leaned down and took up a handful of dust, then let it fall through his blunt, inelegant fingers. Cephas became conscious that he was hearing *quiet*. The ground beneath him had ceased its ceaseless song.

The goliath finished awkwardly. "I—I swear this on stone," he said, and darted back among the wagons.

Whitey the Clown was standing on the other side of the fire, Mattias's pail of fresh water between his arms. His mouth opened wide as he watched his apprentice go.

He peered at Corvus. "Was that a *prayer*?"

Corvus still gazed off toward the wagons but shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "More like a hymn."

Mattias reached out and scratched beneath Trill's chin. "Something memorized by someone born into a faith that preached unquestionable stability," he said, "and unending resistance to change. Imagine growing up in a faith like that when the center of your art, when what's in your *heart*, is improvisation."

Cephas listened for the song of the earth.



The djinni Shahrokh had no need for the pillows and cushions scattered about his inner sanctum, of course, any more than he had any need for a title. But the windsouled genasi, whom Shahrokh and the other djinn of Calimport viewed as something like children, had built their society in mimicry of the human culture they had replaced. Since that human society was an echo—however imperfect—of the glorious culture of the Noble Djinni Calim and his followers, Shahrokh permitted the slaves of the windsouled to appoint his apartments with supposed luxuries such as pillows, and permitted the windsouled themselves to call him the vizar of vizars, adviser and factor to Pasha Marod el Arhapan, the genasi who held sway at the head of the city's fractious leading council.

The only time he even noticed the numberless pillows was on occasions such as these, when he let the currents of air that formed the bottom half of his body flow at their full strength in a cyclone of elemental power. This meant cushions flew everywhere.

It also meant Vizar Shahrokh was angry.

Slaves of a dozen races, their windsouled masters, a few genasi expressing less politically sound elements, and even a few lesser djinn, rushed out of the vizar's path as he flew through the arched hallways of the el Arhapan manor.

The palace was a marvel in a city full of architectural marvels. It was not the only castle that floated high above the ruins that made up much of the old human city, but it was the only one that moved according to its master's will instead of remaining fixed at whatever point its builders had chosen when the final enchantments were laid like cornerstones.

The palace could not go *anywhere*—even in a city as chaotic and ever-changing as Calimport that would be too much. Still, the power and influence of the el Arhapans was

sufficient to allow them to fly their home endlessly back and forth between the two terrestrial structures that had sparked their ascendancy among the windsouled in the first place—the Djen Arenas.

Shahrokh had known the current pasha of games all the brief fifty years of the genasi noble's life, and he firmly believed that Marod would never have directed his floating home anywhere besides the arenas, even if he had the power. Yes, the windsouled were something like children in the eyes of the djinn, and children needed their toys.

Sweeping into the great central courtyard, Shahrokh spared a glance downward. The flagstones that made up the courtyard's surface were clearer than any glass the craftsmen of this wretched world could dream of producing. Like much of the material that went into building Calimport—*Upper* Calimport, the Calimport that mattered—these blocks of crystalline air were brought from the djinn's home in the Elemental Chaos. The stones were quarried from the cliffs of Khamsin and transported to the mortal world under the very noses of the cursed efreet and their firesouled vassals, during the glorious days of Calim's Second Reign earlier in the century.

The thought of his lost lord renewed Shahrokh's ire. Too much was at stake to permit Marod's meddling. His view through the courtyard floor told the djinni that the sultan had moved the palace to its westerly moorage, above the Arena Sabam where the chariot races were held. This meant he would find the windsouled noble in the stables.

With their lesser powers, the genasi had developed an elaborate protocol for flying between buildings of the upper city, and for their rare trips to the earthbound realm of the slaves below. Had he been in less of a rage, Shahrokh might have taken the time to travel along those Saban pathways, marked in the air by floating coils of golden rope. As it was, he simply flew up and over the tiled roofs and doors of the

palace, then dived into the crowded tumult of mud-brick stables that ringed the Arena Sabam.

Any beast that Marod's saddlers could fit with a harness might be found in this warren between the savage races they were forced to run, pulling war chariots manned by slave gladiators of the appropriate size.

In a stable filled with elephants, Shahrokh found the master of games deep in conversation with a dull-eyed ogre gladiator. An especially foolish observer might have pointed out that the incongruous pair each resembled Shahrokh in a different way. The djinni had no legs but went about on an ever-present, ever-circling column of air. But if he had been born with such useless limbs, Shahrokh's would have needed to be as long and heavily muscled as the ogre's to explain his great height, and to match the obvious strength in his bare torso and arms. But where the ogre's skin was a pallid green, Shahrokh's was the same silver tone as the windsouled slavelord's. Pasha and vizar also shared the same smooth scalp, shaved except for long black queues gathered in sapphire clasps. The windsouled also aped the djinni manner of dress. Except for its size, Marod's intricately patterned crimson vest was a close match to the one Shahrokh wore.

If the pasha sensed the vizar's mood, then he ignored it. He greeted the djinni with a smile. "Shahrokh!" he said. "Have you met this ogre? Calls itself Cruddup or something like that—it's the best beast handler among the slaves we bought over the winter—"

The djinni waved a contemptuous hand. The air in the huge ogre's lungs rushed out, the atmosphere around the creature's head flowing away. The giant charioteer collapsed and died in the span of three heartbeats.

Pasha Marod took a single step backward to avoid the ogre's flailing limbs. There was a look of mild distaste on his handsome features. "You owe me fifteen bicentas," he said.

With another wave of his hand, Shahrokh caused a rain of gold coins to fall into the filthy straw of the pen next to them. “Dig it out of the dung, then. It will give you something to do while I shovel the pile you’ve heaped on our efforts.”

A look of understanding crossed the pasha’s face. “You’ve heard that the WeavePasha has my son!” he said. “Exciting, isn’t it? I’d almost forgotten about the boy.”

“The message you intercepted,” said Shahrokh, “was from an agent who is far from trustworthy. That the spy *says* he’s located your lost heir is too little to act on, especially since we are at such a crucial juncture.”

The pasha shrugged. “Too little for *you* to act on, perhaps.”

A faint sound of thunder rolled through the stable, quieting the elephants.

“Marod,” said the djinni, leaning down to look the windsouled in the eye, “what have you done?”

The master of games turned on his heel. “Nothing to jostle the strands in your delicate web, Shahrokh. The boy’s not even in Almraiven yet. Nowhere close, in fact. Our spy is taking him to a village of earthsouled in the Spires of Mir first, though I cannot for the life of me understand why. But it’s far outside the Almraivenar’s sphere of influence *and* he’ll have no reason to suspect my hand in anything. I sent El Pajabbar—they were supposed to be the personal guard of the pasha’s eldest son under the human caliphs, anyway. See? Symmetry. Like their horns.”

Shahrokh settled down, closer to the ground, directing the currents of his lower body to flow so that he studied the pasha’s face eye to eye, from an even height. The windsouled did not flinch from his gaze, even when the djinni held the stare far longer than most genasi could have withstood.

At last, the djinni nodded. “I concede that I am impressed, Pasha. The idea is brutal, but not immediately dangerous to our goals.”

It might even work, Shahrokh thought.



Long leagues south and east of the circus's camp, other bonfires lit the cloudless night. In a shallow dell outside the fortified abbey and village of Akkabal, a ring of fires burned in stone bowls, spitting and popping when the acolytes tending them threw in handfuls of foul-smelling herbs.

One side of the dell was a natural wall of the local bedrock, an outcropping of which had been crudely hacked into a throne bearing the semblance of a huge hand. A thin man, hooded and masked, occupied the throne, flanked by a pair of underpriests.

The three priests of Bane watched the large circle of glyphs that covered most of the floor in the natural amphitheater. Three dozen crossbowmen were positioned on the lip of the dell, evenly interspersed among the acolytes at the watchfires.

One of the underpriests, a woman born in the Ithal Pass and a student of the night sky, took another look up through the flickering red light and black smoke of the fires.

"Late!" she said.

Her colleague, standing on the other side of their superior, spat. "If they were late the last time you checked the stars, Sister Arrovar, further observation will not find the circumstances changed."

He spoke in the barbarous accents of the cold North, and this only heightened his pretension in being the only one of the three Dreadmasters to trek out from the abbey dressed in full ceremonial garb.

Motionless on the rocky throne, the Vigilant Talon Arianus idly watched the bickering of his two underlings. He encouraged their rivalry as a way of keeping their daggers from his own back, and as a distraction from the daily banalities involved in maintaining the détente between his

master’s armed manor and the forces arrayed against them across the contested border in Tethyr. Any distraction from reading another chiding diplomatic communiqué from the Duke of Suretmarch was welcome, even one as mysterious as this unprecedented use of the abbey’s largest teleportation circle by allies unaffiliated with the Church of Bane. But his instructions from his superiors in Mintar were clear.

More sensitive to the arcane energies involved in teleportation than either of the underpriests, Arianus sensed eldritch keys seeking the locks of the symbols of the circle, even while the two of them continued to hiss and curse each other. The magic held an elemental tang, quite unlike the unholy energies that usually activated the gate. He wistfully imagined a life that would allow him the time to study such phenomena—and a surge of anger boiled out of his black heart. The pair of idiots flanking him distracted him from even a cursory examination with their pointless games. He cleared his throat.

The underpriests quieted. The woman’s breath grew shallow, and the man actually staggered in fear.

Somewhat gratified by the reaction, Arianus directed their attention to the center of the circle, where a hazy image appeared. Even though the nature of the ritual bent any light streaming through the portal in odd ways that washed out colors and softened details, it was clear that the circle at the other side of the magical connection was drawn in a far more richly appointed space than this stark dell.

The Vigilant Talon remembered the words that appeared in his mind the previous night, the message laced with just enough pain that he would know how important his master deemed it. “An old debt comes due. The djinnspawn holding Calim’s marker sends those of the horns through Foxx’s gate at tomorrow’s ninth bell. A scroll follows.”

That scroll, delivered at highsun by a messenger who had ridden two horses to death in his haste to deliver it, rested in

the Talon's sleeve. He knew who El Pajabbar were by reputation, but was grateful nonetheless for the carefully worded warnings the message contained. Until the last few moments, he had considered sharing those warnings with his underpriests.

The first heavily armored figures began leaping through the portal. An unnecessary flourish, as the linked gates allowed those one hundred and thirty leagues to be crossed with a simple step. But the Calimien were nothing if not excessive.

The Dark Brother at his left hand sputtered. "We allow prancing *beasts* to profane our Black Lord's holy ground now, Talon?"

More and more bullheaded warriors came through the gate, bellowing and brandishing their halberds, singing some brutish marching song and lining up under the direction of the largest minotaur of all, a female whose horns were ground to razor points and whose flaring nostrils were pierced with heavy gold rings.

Arianus decided then that of the two, he disliked Sister Arrovar marginally less. "It does seem a bit excessive," he said to the Dark Brother. "That woman there must be their sergeant—their musar—why don't you go ask her to be more respectful?"

The underpriest bowed to Arianus, spared a sneer for his rival, and marched stiffly across the dell. As he approached the minotaurs, the last of their number emerged through the portal, and Arianus felt the odd magics that held it open at its other end die away.

The musar caught sight of the underpriest and strode forward as if to greet him. But the woman lowered her head and charged when the man raised his hand, calling, "See here!" With a roar, she pressed her gauntleted fists into the rocky soil, and, using the coiled strength of all four of her limbs, she sprang at the dark priest.

The man’s black lacquered ring mail was heavy and costly, but there was more of the ornamentor’s art in its making than the armorer’s. The minotaur’s horn slid through the expensive lacquer and cheap steel, and on farther, piercing padded undershirt, then fat and muscle and bone, then steel and lacquer again, as she drove her horn completely through the priest of Bane.

The musar rose to her full height, roaring, with the lifeless corpse swinging from her gilded rack and blood streaming down her face. With a contemptuous toss of her enormous head, she threw the priest’s body across the dell, where it landed with a crunch.

Arianus watched the display impassively. At his side, he could feel Sister Arrovar gathering her divine powers, mustering defenses that were formidable, but which he knew would be inadequate if he let things progress any further.

“El Pajabbar,” he said, putting out a hand to halt her preparations. “The horned ones. Enforcers of the Caleph’s Court, and as deadly a group of fighters as ever stalked the South.”

Sister Arrovar ceased her gathering of magic, but did not release the energies she had already brought to the surface of her mind. She said, “It is said they treat every ground as a battleground and will not march across it without first spilling blood,” she said.

“Yes,” said the Vigilant Talon. “I read that somewhere just recently.”



Whatever words passed between the surviving Banite priests and the monstrous leader of the minotaurs were impossible to hear from the lip of the dell. The only other sounds that remained were the crackling watchfires in their stone bowls and the occasional creak of leather against steel

when one of the temple guards shifted his weight. Even the sounds of the few night-thriving insects active this early in the year died away with the waves of sorcery that rolled out of the natural depression.

The minotaur bellowed at her troops, and they gathered in a semblance of order. She did not pause for parting words with the Banites, instead trotting away from the priests, past her followers, and up the shallow western slope of the dell. The other two dozen minotaurs fell in behind their leader, disappearing into the night.

The robed acolytes doused the watchfires, clearing the space, and the remaining priests made no delay in leaving. The tentative song of the insects in the tall grasses above the dell returned. On the westward slope of the dell, where the grass was trampled by the departed minotaurs, there was movement.

A screen woven of weeds and dusted with soil slowly pulled back. First Shan, then Cynda, took long, careful looks at their surroundings.

Cynda’s face bore a grimace, and her sister saw that her left arm hung at a painful angle. In the moonless night, the subtleties of their fingertalk would be unreadable, but it was clear that one of the five-hundred-pound brutes had trod on Cynda’s shoulder as it jogged out of the dell. Shan moved to put her hands against her sister’s shoulder so she could wrench the arm back into place, but Cynda stopped her, pressing a finger to her lips.

It would have to wait. They could not risk the sound of the shoulder popping back into its socket.

There would have been no accompanying gasp of pain to guard against. Even if she’d had a voice to cry out with, Cynda’s discipline was better than that.

Shan placed four fingers on the back of her sister’s bare hand and drummed, creating the familiar beat of a horse at full gallop. They would need to find fast mounts to get ahead of the minotaurs, and use all their trailcraft to find the

swiftest route. No road led into the Spires of Mir from the Banite holdings, so the halflings and the minotaurs would be racing across unbroken ground.

Cynda made a careful sweep of their impromptu blind. They would leave no sign they had been there. She moved as quickly as she dared, because the only advantage they possessed was that they, unlike the minotaurs, knew that a race was being run. They knew they must be the first to reach Argentor, the only place the minotaurs could be bound.

CHAPTER SIX

Peace is never a simple choice.
—“Helpful Janna Seeks a Husband”
The Founding Stories of Calimshan

NOW RELEASE!” SHOUTED FLEK.

At the young earthsouled man’s signal, Cephas let go of the energy that rolled in his gut like the fear of falling. He thought of it as a snatch of melody, notes from the unending song of the earth that he gathered inside himself. As Flek and the other genasi of Argentor had taught him, he directed the pulse of force down through the sole of his foot, timing its flow so that it rushed back into the earth just as he brought his foot down in a crashing stomp.

The force flowed through the ground around him like ripples from a stone thrown in water. The earth shook, and the section of rocky wall next to Cephas vibrated as it was undermined by the ground crumbling beneath it. The outcropping seemed about to settle back into immobility, but then a cascade of pulverized stone invisible beneath the surface—Cephas could *feel* the fine differences of density in

the ground he'd struck—flowed deeper, seeking solidity. The section of granite teetered and crashed outward, raining a cloud of dust.

Flek and his two sisters rushed over to Cephas, delighted with his display of skill.

"Look," said Flek, examining the opening Cephas widened in the base of the granite spire. "That's a good doorway. You found the internal fissures instinctively. You are a quick study, Cephas."

Marashan, the younger girl, stuck her head in the shallow cave they had spent the morning excavating, stepping between Cephas and her brother to do so and treading on her sister's foot as she went. "I told Mother this spire was perfect for a dwelling," she said. "If we're careful with our strikes, we can expose some crystal deposits and let light stream through. This will make you a fine home, Cephas!"

Cephas did not respond. The girl had assumed he intended to stay in the village from the moment she first saw him when the circus rolled into Argentor. Luckily, her sister spoke, and he did not have to explain yet again that he had no plans to leave the circus.

"If exposing the crystal requires *you* to be careful, Marashan, then we can save ourselves some time if we fetch sacks to collect the dust you'll make of them first," said Sonnett. Cephas had yet to determine if the middle child was small for her age or if Marashan was large for hers, and he found telling the sisters apart difficult unless one of them spoke. Good thing, he thought, Marashan rarely stops speaking.

"At least if I'm here we'll actually get down to work instead of spending all day *planning* the work," Marashan said. The network of golden energy lines across her ruddy face flared.

"Peace!" said Flek, and passed his open hand before his chest in a sloping arc that curved outward, ending with his palm facing down, parallel with the ground. This was the first word all the genasi of Argentor said when the circus

arrived, and it was the word they used most. Sign and syllable, they called their pairing of motion and word, and they used it as a greeting, in departure, as a gentle exclamation, and sometimes, as imprecation. It was only an explicit request when Marashan was present, because other than her endless self-narrated adventures, there was little in village life to disturb the peace.

“A rare people,” Corvus had said to Cephas before he launched into an extended talk with Elder Lin, leader of the village and mother to Cephas’s new friends.

Cephas could not help but think of the three as children, even though he had never known the company of children, and Flek, according to Elder Lin’s guess at Cephas’s age, was older than he. Cephas had answered Elder Lin’s questions and let her examine the gold lines on his skin while Corvus watched.

It was the particular patterns of Cephas’s *szuldar* that Elder Lin had spent the most time studying. “It will take your eyes a long time to learn, Cephas, but while the lines are unique to every genasi, of all expressions, not just earthsouled, there are strong family resemblances told by them. And the pattern even stays true across expressions, among those of our people who choose to shift their selves.”

Cephas began to ask the Elder what this meant, but Corvus had interrupted. “Later, later, if you please, lady. The boy has much to learn already, yes?”

Elder Lin had agreed, and she and Corvus finished making the circus’s arrangements with the village. In return for a day’s rest and the right to refill their water casks from Argentor’s hidden wells, the circus would raise the tent and put on a full performance for the genasi the next night. That deal struck, she had turned Cephas loose with her waiting offspring and closeted herself with Corvus.

More agreements had needed reaching than just the scheduling of a show, Cephas assumed.

The first thing he learned from the other earthsouled was that he would never be able to block out the sound of the earthsong. “Why would you *want* to?” Marashan had asked, incredulous. Their way of living with the constant music—and they stressed it was a *way of life*—was to welcome it. They suggested he open himself to it, to listen, and more.

“Sing *with* it,” said Sonnett, unself-conscious as she took Cephas’s hand, not noticing his darkening cheeks. “Not aloud, necessarily—”

“Please don’t encourage her to sing!” shouted Marashan.

“But you may, if you wish. Either way, listen to our Old Mother, feel her stony roots echoed in her song, and find the notes you can harmonize. These are the chimes that are keys, the points where the ley lines of the spinning globe intersect with the *szuldar* lines of our restless selves, and letting them sound together is how we release the tectonic forces the *szuldar* keep fettered. It is how we quiet ourselves, and know peace.”

Marashan tugged at his other hand. “And it’s how we blast holes in stuff. Come on, let’s *show* him!”

Flek rolled his eyes and indicated that Cephas should follow his youngest sister, and soon they were clambering through the loose rubble that marked the western border of the village, beneath the towering spires of rock the genasi called the Sarenstar, the place of deadly teeth. Cephas picked out the common-tongue translation amid Marashan’s chatter, right after she had advised him that everything her sister told him was a word-for-word recitation of one of their mother’s lessons and that she hoped he wasn’t impressed. At last he held up his hands in an effort to slow the tide of the girl’s talk.

“What? What is that?” Marashan asked, aping the move. “Is that a gladiatorial stance? Are you going to show me some moves?” Elder Lin had been troubled to learn of Cephas’s upbringing and recent past; Sonnett mortified; Flek cautiously interested. Marashan was wildly enthusiastic.

“No,” said Cephas. “I just have a question about the name you used there, for the spires. The circus folk call those the Spires of Mir, and that is how they are marked on Corvus’s maps. I—I can write that out for you if you like. I have my stylus.”

Flek looked confused, but he shook his head and quieted his sister. “No need. We know the name. The word we use, ‘Sarenstar,’ isn’t any older than the word ‘Mir.’ When the trees turned, it seemed a better name than the other to carry on from our grandsires. The humans of Calimshan called this the place of sharp teeth because of the fell monsters they believed to dwell in the deepest woods—the *ssri Tel’Quessir*, great dragons, even older things.”

Cephas said, “Mattias Farseer told me that this was once a forest, and that there is still a great stretch of woods farther south called the Mir. I know nothing of dragons, though, or of the other monsters you named, *ssri* …?”

“Ssri Tel’Quessir,” said Sonnett. “It is what the dark elves call themselves. I hope you never have to learn anything of the drow, Cephas. They are a great challenge to peace.”

The siblings made the sweeping, open-palmed gesture as one when Sonnett spoke, and Cephas made a clumsy attempt to copy them, eliciting a giggle from Marashan. He thought anything but peaceful thoughts, remembering Grinta’s advice regarding drow: fire, light, open ground.

The three were seated together among the boulders, for once relatively still, and Cephas could see the family resemblance was tempered by their ages, and by other characteristics. They shared something close to Cephas’s own deep red skin color, and like all the genasi of the village, they were smooth skinned even to their scalps. The familial connection was told by their similar noses and crooked grins. But what set them apart from one another most was the whirling, looping network of the *szuldar* lines. Even between Sonnett and Marashan who, despite their age difference, resembled each other almost as closely as Shan

did Cynda, the patterns of the softly glowing gold lines were distinct, individual, unique.

On Jazeerijah, the freedmen refused to answer any questions from Cephas about the intricacies of his own skin. Azad had even told him the lines were signs of disease. Here in Argentor, the genasi celebrated the bold, singular *szuldar* patterns. Cephas had seen men and women with tattoos designed to accentuate the lines, and the clothing styles of all the villagers, even those of Elder Lin and Sonnett, were tailored to show the lines on each person's arms, legs, stomach, and back.

He had much to learn, indeed, and not just about his earthsouled heritage, for here was Tobin come to fetch him back to the grounds that would house the circus's performance.

"It is time to raise the tent!" said the goliath. "And we don't even have to sink poles, because we can use these marvelous spires!"

Cephas meant to ask his new friends to forgive him for leaving them, but they were on their feet and headed for the wagons even before him. Tobin laughed. "You watch and see if Whitey doesn't put the talking girl to cleaning out Trill's nesting ground."

Though he had not mentioned the faith of Grumbar since the night on the plains, and none of the circus folk thought it wise to ask him about it, Tobin had expressed relief that Corvus's information about these genasi being followers of his people's god proved only partly correct. Asked about Grumbar, Elder Lin said, "Our Old Mother has many lovers."

Marashan quickly distanced the others, but when Flek and Sonnett saw they were leaving the visitors behind, they stopped and waited between a pair of spires flanking one of the village streets. The earthsouled of Argentor used no wagons or beasts of burden, but their avenues were broad and smooth. This was one of the signs that told a visitor they were in the village instead of the wildlands of the Sarenstar.

The ground deeper in the spires was a jagged chaos of boulders, gravel fields, and shear, bottomless crevasses.

The dwellings and workshops of the village were located inside the spires themselves, sculpted by the power of the earthsouled over decades. According to Mattias, even the shortest of the spires towered above the mightiest trees of the Realms, and some of those in the village were honeycombed with chambers all the way to their summits. The view from these highest chambers, through crystal windows or cleverly concealed turrets, took in the pass to the east and the looming bulk of the Marching Mountains to the southwest.

They were tightly packed in most places, but where a natural clearing occurred, the genasi dressed out broad courtyards and squares. One of these, at the end of the short road through the Sarenstar from the prairie, was called the Welcome Terrace. Here, the circus had set its wagons and marked off the area to be enclosed in the largest tent.

When Cephas, Tobin, and the Elder's children arrived at the terrace, circus folk were already scattered amid the spires high overhead, stringing up thick hawsers of hemp. Melda directed a team of oxen in pulling hard against a yoke attached to a vast scrollwork of canvas. Slowly, the tent spread out across the ground and the smell of sailcloth filled the area. Cephas discovered he was crouching, ready to strike.

Tobin put a hand on Cephas's shoulder as he stood. "No fighting today, Cephas," he said. "You are a strongman now."

And it was time to put that to the test, but not yet in performance. Once the tentworks were laid out and the supporting lines strung, the walls and enormous draped ceiling of the tent had to be hauled up by main force. Whitey and two of his many brothers hung from a dubious network of lighter ropes above the hawsers, ready to direct the placement of the canvas.

“Usually that would be Shan and Cynda up there,” Tobin said.

Cephas was curious to see their acrobatics played out on the high wire. But the twins had yet to return from whatever errand they’d stolen off on days before. Cephas hoped they would find their way to the village in time for the night’s show.



Shortly before the circus was to begin its performance, Corvus called Cephas and Whitey to his wagon. Rummaging through a trunk, he withdrew a small wooden box and a set of three interlinked rings. Giving these to Whitey, he said, “Show Cephas the way of these. I’ll see to the lights.”

Whitey was already costumed and made up, deep in character. The clowns of his tradition did not speak, so he sketched a comical bow to the ringmaster as acknowledgment and motioned for Cephas to follow him to the tent.

He handed off the box and rings for Cephas to carry, then took the short walk across the Welcome Terrace as an opportunity to warm up for the night.

Walking ahead of Cephas in a curious, shuffling gait that was half dance and half waddle, Whitey reversed direction, whipping toward Cephas in a lurching backhandspring. The clown spun his arms, dropped his shoulders unevenly, and landed on his backside.

A hissing noise sounded, and Whitey’s confused expression mirrored Cephas’s own. The clown peered over his left shoulder, over his right, and then rolled backward into an impossible pose, his feet flat on the ground but his back arched so severely that he was still looking straight at Cephas. He was bent in two with his hands around his ankles, his head tucked between his legs, peering out over

the seat of his pants, with his generous bottom pointed at the sky. It was his pants that were hissing.

Like all his brothers and sisters, and now Tobin, Whitey wore colored pantaloons in performance that were woven of enough cloth to make a four-person tent—if four people could be found willing to sleep in a pink and green tent edged with silk sashes. All that cloth stretched to its limits as the seat of the clown's pants inflated, ballooning larger and larger, and Cephas saw it being lit from within by flickering yellow light.

Whitey clapped, and Cephas looked down to see that he had somewhat untangled himself, enough that his chin rested on the flagstones. He released his hold on his ankles and wormed his hands up into his pants legs. In the glowing balloon above, Whitey's hands appeared, his delicate wrists and long fingers recognizable to Cephas even in silhouette.

The silhouettes became something different, as Whitey wove his fingers together into the shape of a dragon, a castle, a man with the head of a crow.

"Whitey!" The voice belonged to Corvus, calling from his wagon. "Save it for the audience!"

Whitey's hands changed from a kenku to a clown, which shrugged. The glowing light shifted from yellow to green. Then, as the shadow puppet beckoned for Cephas to follow, Whitey gently floated into the air, carried aloft by his enormously inflated pants, and drifted across the courtyard.



The magic of the linked rings Corvus gave Whitey enabled them to expand and retract, separate, and rejoin. At the mental direction of the ringmaster, the rings changed size and configuration from act to act as the circus progressed. Nightfeather's Circus of Wonders was not a large concern, and the troupe rarely staged more than one act at a time, but they almost always began one act while another was

just ending. “No transitions,” said Corvus. “Never give them time to think about what they are cheering about.”

For some performers, the rings did not define the space an act took up, as with Mattias and Trill. Cephas was scheduled to make his debut as a strongman after their centerpiece act. “While they’re still breathless—they’ll glide right over the rough patches as long as you don’t make too much of them yourself,” Corvus said.

The ringmaster’s advice was foremost in Cephas’s thoughts. He was so focused on his own act and the cue to come near the end of Mattias’s performance that he wondered if he would remember anything of the historical reenactment preceding his debut.

He needn’t have worried.

Corvus caused the floating limelights to shift from red, through gold and amber, darkening all the while to recall the colors of a setting sun. Minor magics in the silver-lined smoke pots hanging just below the canvas ceiling sent glowing clouds of deep purple through the air. The roustabouts took the mists boiling around their positions in the peaks as their signal to pull away one section of the roof, their work concealed from the crowd by light and mist. As Whitey’s youngest brothers finished mugging for the crowd, Corvus amplified his voice and let an enormous whisper roll through the big top like a high plains wind.

“Here we are, friends, taking our ease, you in your seats and we on our stage. We laugh and sing in the shadow of the Marching Mountains, separated by the whole length of that storied range from another stage, one where laughter was rarely heard in the dark years performers danced across it, and where now, the only audience is the restless dead. I speak of Monrath Teshy Mir, the ruined city of emperors, the fell and fallen capital of the Sixth Age of Empire … Shoonach!”

When Cephas unfolded the grandstand from its magical box, he’d seen the hideaways concealed beneath the

audience’s seats. Circus folk hidden there gasped and whispered. Their practiced unease spread among the earthsouled, the young whispering questions and their elders whispering explanations.

In the haze at the back of the tent, the vague silhouette of a distant city of minarets and spires wove itself out of dust and smoke. A blue ribbon of a river flowed beneath the image, rippling like a bolt of cloth being unrolled by unseen hands, which, in fact, was what it was.

“Shoonach!” shouted Corvus, bringing his voice up from a whisper to a baritone strike. The attention of anyone in the crowd who might have studied the backdrop returned to the ringmaster. Melda and a roustabout whipped the woolen current of the River Agis into a historically questionable frenzy.

“Named by the Shoon emperors in their hubris, built by the labor of their fallen enemies, unassailable by the brave across four hundred years of its cursed existence. No hero ever dared to face the necromancer kings in their place of power.”

Twin lines of rope stirred in the sawdust of the central ring, and Corvus made a signal for the drummers standing on either side of him to sound thunder.

The noise served its purpose, drawing the audiences’ collective attention again, long enough for the ropes attached to the wheeled cart Mattias stood on to be lost in the general gloom. Tobin and another clown cranked the barrel winch attached to the lines. Across the tent, Melda whipped the blue cloth high just as the erstwhile Imperial Barge and its occupant came floating into the center ring.

“Behold!” said Corvus, “The villain of the Age, Kodos el Jhotos! Qysar Shoon the Seventh!” The circus folk concealed below the crowd did not have to boo and hiss to stir the genasi. Even Cephas had heard the name Shoon VII, used as a curse and threat by the Calishites of Jazeerijah, by the merchants of Saradush, and even among the goblins of the

Omlarandins. Any culture in the South could be counted on to have stories of the Necroqysar, Corvus claimed. “It’s what makes him such a great villain,” said Corvus. “Everybody fills in his own details.”

Every story of the Qysar featured his infamous Staff of Shoon. Mattias held up a prop staff in a dazzling beam of light, showing off an ivory shaft topped with an opal the size of a human fist. Waves of black necrotic energy spilled down from the gem, flowing like water over Mattias’s fist, then up his arm to invest his elaborate costume with a glow that made the old man stand out in the darkened tent.

Corvus claimed the hardest part of a ringmaster’s job was deciding when to use real magics to accomplish an effect, and when to use more mundane means. “Sometimes making someone fly with wires and winches is more convincing than making him fly with sorcery,” he said.

Up in the big top’s peaks, roustabouts cranked handles and slid pulleys back and forth across guy wires. In the center ring, Qysar Shoon VII rose into the air, brandishing his staff and glaring at the audience.

“I killed a hundred unicorns to forge this implement of power,” Mattias growled, swooping low over the section of the seats where most of the adolescent earthsouled had segregated themselves. “And I spend my nights hunting children, because the Staff of Shoon thirsts for blood!”

His last word stretched out long, its sound merging with crashing cymbals and rolling drums. Mattias swept his staff down at the earthsouled, who shrank away and ducked, clinging to one another and shrieking, though laughter could also be heard. One genasi alone stood up and made an energetic leap, trying to wrest the staff from Mattias’s hands. The old ranger was too quick for the girl—Cephas would wager any amount that it was Marashan—and he pulled the staff back, managing a quick rap of the offender’s knuckles and eliciting more laughter from the audience.

“No hero can stand against me and my deadly magics of magical death!” Mattias screamed.

“No hero, Qysar?” called Corvus in response. “What of another villain, then?” The drums rolled. “What of your greatest enemy? What of the Terror of Tethyr? What of the Azure Death, the Shatterer of Bhaelros and Destroyer of the Eclipse, Mother of Bluetalon and Devourer of the Necromancer’s Arm? What of the Dragon Qysara, what of the elder wyrm, what of Iryklathagra, whom men call—”

In the stand, many voices roared a name. Corvus anticipated them and timed his loudest shout yet to join them in chorus.

“Sharpfangs!” The word blasted through the tent, up and out into the night sky, where it was answered.

His task of storing the wheeled miniature barge done, Tobin came and stood beside Cephas. The goliath was made up like all the other clowns, costumed in their garish jackets and pantaloons and enormous shoes. His features were concealed beneath white greasepaint and highlighted with brightly hued patterns. A green wig resembling a fern covered his bald head.

“Of all the dragons she plays,” Tobin said, “I think Trill likes this blue one the best.”

The wyvern screamed again, then dived through the misty clouds concealing the big top’s roof. The gallons of paint that went into her costuming were even more brightly colored than Tobin’s. Trill positively *glowed* blue, and through no magic beyond sapphire tints, the rising lights, and, all could see, her own enormous pride. She wheeled above the crowd, then brought her wings close and darted to the edge of the tent, turning at the last instant to beat her wings again and glide in a great circle encompassing the whole of the interior. She made the arc with her back to the performance ring, rushing from spotlight to spotlight, and the countless pieces of costume jewelry pasted to her scales glittered and shone.

She screamed again, and this time she landed in the exact center of the tent, stretching her legs and buffeting the air with her batlike wings. The crowd shouted and stomped. Trill responded by screaming still louder and opening her jaws wide. Then, unexpectedly, she quieted and attempted a surreptitious glance sideways at Corvus. The gesture's subtlety was lost on those watching, since her head was the size of a rain barrel. Corvus gestured impatiently for her to open her mouth again and turn back to where Mattias brandished his glowing staff. Trill ducked her head in a bobbing nod and shook her wings. She opened her jaws wide again, but still darted her black eyes back and forth between her supposed archenemy and the ringmaster.

Corvus rolled a wand over the back of his ebony claws, and a bolt of lightning manifested out of thin air in front of Trill's snapping teeth. The energy of the blast lit up the whole of the tent, and the bolt struck at Mattias, forking all around him and raising the smell of ozone. Mattias held his staff high, and the lightning spilled over a penumbra of flickering shadow, exhausting itself into the ground around him—but still driving him to his knees.

"That's the part she likes, the lightning," said Tobin. "Corvus won't let them run this act when we're farther north because that dragon Trill's playing, Iryklathagra, she's supposed to wake up from a long sleep sometime soon. Corvus says we shouldn't risk her coming to a show."

A green-gloved hand reached between him and Tobin, angled up, and gave the goliath's bright red nose a good twist.

"Ouch!" said Tobin. "Why did you twist my nose, Candle?"

Whitey's sister, who was paired with Tobin for the night's performance, was named Candasa, but while in her face paint she answered only to Candle. She mimed fastening a button in front of her lips.

Awareness lit up Tobin's eyes. "Yes!" he said. "I am sorry, Cephas, but I forgot—I am not Tobin now, but Tuber the

Clown. I do not speak!”

He said this loud enough that the genasi in the stands closest shushed him. Trill had quieted out in the main ring and Mattias’s voice could be heard.

“May your body rot and your scales crumble!” Mattias shouted, his voice shaking in a vibrato as he pitched it much higher than his usual baritone. “May your fangs grow dull and your wings wither! Iryklathagra! I will dine on your flesh and make a mantle of your wretched hide! Tonight, you die!”

As he said the last word, Mattias thrust the staff forward. Cephas did not think any in the audience noticed that the old man was sometimes using the staff to lean on. A spectral skull, glowing green but with eye sockets of bottomless black, grew from the staff’s end like a bubble from a child’s clay soap pipe. With a popping noise, the skull floated free of the staff, still growing. It shook and vibrated in time to the music that rose from the players marching out beneath it, all of them dressed in more sedate versions of Mattias’s imperial finery and wearing green skull masks themselves.

The skull opened its mouth and joined the musicians’ song:

> “On a dark, dark mount
> Oh so long ago
> She lurked and pounced and screamed
> And she prowled back to and fro.”

Trill shook her wings again, then rose up on her legs and stalked back and forth in front of the skull, snapping and hissing at the crowd. The tip of her tail ticked back and forth in time to the music.

> “On a dark, dark mount
> Oh so long ago
> Beneath Selûne’s Tears
> The necromancer was her foe.”

Mattias twirled his staff like a stave fighter beset on all sides, black bolts crackling from its end to explode against the ground, the canvas above, and in midair just over the heads of the audience.

> “On a dark, dark mount
> Oh so long ago
> Wyrm and wizard met to fight
> But ’twas the chained who felt the blows.”

Roustabouts moved in around Cephas, and he knew there were others running outside the back tent wall, readying the props for the next act—his act. In the run-throughs, Corvus said that he would improvise patter to narrate Mattias and Trill’s exit and his own entrance, but as Cephas listened in the dark, the speech did not sound improvised to him.

“The great city of Shoonach was a city of the South. Most of those who lived there, and who died there in the terrible wars fought by Sharpfangs and the Necroqysar, were slaves. Like the djinn who ruled before them and all the Calephs who’ve followed down the long count of years since, the Qysars of the Shoon Imperium built their empire on the backs of the enslaved.”

Trill charged across the tent and snatched Mattias up in her jaws. The ranger struggled and cursed, swinging his staff wildly and releasing more black bolts. More and more of them exploded, barely short of the upturned faces of the hushed crowd of genasi.

Crouching deep on her powerful legs, Trill jumped into the air and brought her wings down. The wind raised by the wyvern’s taking flight stirred sawdust and blew swirling designs in the glowing smoke above.

Trill flew around the circus tent once again, this time spiraling upward. Mattias bucked and squirmed in her mouth, and the black bolts kept increasing in frequency

until they became a single beam of screaming, smoking ruin. All around the three empty rings, bolts of lightning struck from nowhere, arcing from point to point, dazzling in their blue fury.

The backdrop of the city's skyline was cranked up again, but this time instead of a river in the foreground, dozens of miniature buildings spread out—low, straw-thatched huts of mud brick. When the lightning struck among them, blasting them to bits, there was a suggestion of tiny figures running and ducking, shadow puppets that disappeared into the rubble or were obliterated by the black energies of Mattias's staff.

"The mightiest of the mighty, friends!" shouted Corvus. "Names that shake the Realms a thousand years on! A battle the histories called inconsequential, costing nothing more than the lives of seventy-five thousand slaves."

Trill flew up through the gap in the canvas ceiling, Mattias already swinging his leg around to find his customary seat on her back. Cephas saw this from where he now lay on his back in the center ring, hidden from view by the low clouds of dun-colored smoke that boiled around his props. The roustabouts finished arranging the artfully constructed rubble and scurried offstage. Most of the bricks and stones were painted muslin stretched over wicker frames, but the heavy blocks they heaped atop Cephas were quite real. Casting the stones away would take an effort. And it had to be an *artful* effort, he reminded himself.

The lights shifted their colors, lightening to a more sprightly tone matched by the music played by the musicians. When the audience turned their attention back to the center ring, they saw a full-size version of one of the collapsed huts from the finale of Mattias's act. Cephas was invisible but for one sandaled foot.

"Only a figure out of legend could withstand such a catastrophe," said Corvus. "Today, none walk among us with the might and vim to survive. Look at this collapsed

structure before you, brought at great expense and under the direst circumstances from the hidden ruins of far Shoonach itself. Nightfeather's Circus of Wonders counts itself blessed to ply our trade tonight before people wise in the ways of rock, earthwalkers and stonemasters unparalleled in all Faerûn. Friends, your expert eyes tell you the truth of what lies before you. No ordinary mortal could survive the force that fell on this building. Any poor soul inside would be instantly crushed! Even, if by some miracle they survived, there would be no hope of escape, not when tons of rubble lay above.…"

Caught up in the narration, Cephas moved his leg perhaps a heartbeat later than he was meant to.

"But wait," said Corvus. "What was that? Did any of you sense movement?"

Marashan's voice called out from the crowd. "Are you blind? It's *Cephas*! He's lying right there under those bricks!"

Corvus laughed along with the rest of the crowd, and Cephas took that to mean he would not be given his scripted cue. With considerable effort, he lifted the paving stone lying across his chest and flung it across the ring.

The kenku's voice rolled like the drums. "Honored Argentori!" he cried. "Behold! The Wind That Blinds! The Tempest That Scours! Marvel at the feats of the strongest man alive … The Sandstorm!"



Melda had been married to Whitey the Clown for ten years even before the two of them signed on with Corvus Nightfeather. And she still couldn't tell which of her many brothers-in-law was which when they wore their makeup. She had no idea who came rushing up to her outside the tent, pointing back to the wagons.

But she knew the clowning life well enough to know what was part of the act and what was not. She recognized genuine panic and weighted that against her respect for her husband's family traditions.

She laid her hand on the clown's shoulder and said, "Tell me what's going on or I will tie a knot with your legs that doesn't require any tricks with big britches."

When he spoke, she identified the voice as that of the second-eldest brother, Blue, a man not inclined to excitability. "Horses," he said, "riding up from the pass, fast."

Melda cursed beneath her breath and thought. She said, "Mattias should be back at his pet's nest. Find him, and then tell Whitey to wipe off the face paint and get into his fancy togs, because I'm betting he'll be stepping in for Corvus." She watched Blue go, looked around long enough to find one of the mallets the roustabouts used to drive the tent stakes, and then strode toward the road, damning the locals' odd philosophy as she went.

"Any right-thinking village," she said, "would have a militia."



When the figure loomed up out of the dark, a hammer coming off its shoulder, Shan let a silver-tipped dart drop from the sheath in her sleeve into her right hand. A heartbeat before she loosed it, her sister reached up from behind and knocked her toss wide.

Unquestioning of Cynda's judgment, Shan knew they had found a friendly face at last. When she brought the blowing pony they rode to a trembling stop, she even saw who. The hammer was a workman's mallet, and the figure was Melda. They had found the circus.

"Shan! Cynda!" the woman cried. "What have you done to these animals? You know better than to ride a beast so hard!"

The sisters were riding double on the strongest pony remaining of the three stolen from the abbey's stables. The one trailing them on a lead blew out not long before, and, in the light of torches brought up by roustabouts, Cynda saw that the little roan's eyes rolled. Later, she would have to find a way to tell gentle Melda about the dappled mare put down with a broken leg halfway through their mad dash across the plain. She needed someone to know they showed that pony honor and respect. Only harshest necessity drove the sisters to push these animals so far beyond their limits.

Shan rested, her hands on her knees, breathing almost as hard as the ponies. The hand that brought her water was Mattias Farseer's.

The old man waited for her to drink, then said, "What is it?"

Mattias was as skilled with the twins' fingertalk as the women themselves. She began to tell him.

Cynda interrupted with a quick gesture. All the circus folk knew the sisters' sign for quiet because it was a gesture borrowed from Corvus. There were cheers and laughter coming from the tent, and the ponies breathed like bellows. The pitch in the torches burned with an audible hiss. The night was not quiet.

Even above those noises, something could be heard back down the road. The way to Argentor from the plain was as broad and smooth as any merchant king's road in the cities of the North. It ran straight, up a shallow grade. The Spires of Mir threw back echoes from any traffic along the road, and the sounds carried up from the grasslands.

The twins had no need to communicate further. The sound of many heavy hooves, marching fast, cut through the night like a sword.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Among the Djen slave races Calim brought through the Airy Gate were the hubryn, *who mingled with the native humans and became our ancestors. There, too, were the* hin, *who founded the divers nations of the halflings. And Calim also brought the horned* yikaria, *who feed their children blood*.
—Akabar ibn Hrellam
Empires of the Shining Sands, vol. ii

NINLILAH ADH ARHAPAN, MUSAR OF EL PAJABBAR, SENT no scouts and attempted no secrecy. During the long run across the plain, the scent of horses fleeing before them alerted the minotaurs to spies even before they found the carcass of a pony in a dry gully. The beast had been put down with a single, swift strike, bespeaking a level of skill that Ninlilah respected.

The spies—two or more halflings by their footprints—did not hide the body, and neither did they make any effort to conceal signs of their flight through the prairie grasses. They

traded stealth for speed, rejecting the skulking ways their kind typically embraced.

This was something else Ninlilah respected.

El Pajabbar would be met by foes warned of their coming. Whether those foes would be *prepared* was another question. The master of games said “earthsouled,” which could mean strength to rival the minotaurs’ own, but he also said “peace loving,” a phrase the genasi used for cowardice.

It did not matter. The heir of the master of games was somewhere among these spires of stone. The people who hid him from her would fight or not, and so they would die or not.

He is found, Ninlilah thought to herself again. Again, she stifled the primal bray she was moved to sound. Marod yn Marod is *found*.

A strange scent flared her nostrils, and Ninlilah raised one mailed fist. Behind her, the two lines of warriors clattered to a stop, cursing and bellowing.

She ignored their petty insubordination, seeking among the hulking silhouettes for the downward-pointing horns of a particular male. Seeing that one of her fighters already turned his muzzle up to the air, she knew her impulse to stop and investigate the alien smell was wise.

Wrinkling his broad, red nose, the bullock came to stand by Ninlilah. “Sultana—” he said, then staggered, spitting blood and teeth when she struck him across the muzzle.

“You are to call me *Musar*!” she roared, and brought her chain-draped hoof down on the warrior’s dewclaw.

He did not cry out in pain. He valued his life too much for that. Instead, the young minotaur ducked his head in ritual submission and said, “A thousand pardons would not excuse my offense.”

Ninlilah snorted, because it was clear from his tone that the bullock was not sure what offense he had given. “You are too free with your words,” she told him. “The yikaria have no herd rank, by the vizar’s order.”

The bullock kept his head down. “This is known,” he said. “But so far from Calimport, so far from the djinn’s hearing …”

Ninlilah resisted the urge to strike the fool again. “There is no place outside the vizar’s hearing,” she said. “Marod el Arhapan may have sent us here without Shahrokh’s knowledge, but I assure you the djinni knows all by now. His spies among the Banites would have informed him even if the pasha’s ritualists did not hurry to him as soon as they closed the gate behind us. Have care. Now, use the gifts the Forgotten God gave you.”

The male raised his head, sniffing again. All of the minotaurs could track and hunt by scent, but as was the case with many of the red-faced clans, his sense of smell was preternatural.

“It is like the drakes the windsouled sometimes use in the arena,” he said. “And something else. Like a hunting bird, a raptor.”

Ninlilah wondered what manner of creature these earthsouled might be using to guard the heir.

An image of the boy came to her mind. Stout and fierce, he had just begun to walk when Azad adh Arhapan stole him away and made an oathbreaker of her. But before that, before he was stolen, his unsure steps always brought him to her side, wherever she was.

The bullock took a cautious step backward. Ninlilah realized she was sounding a warning, so low that only another yikaria would hear it—another yikaria, or any predator so foolish as to threaten a calf.

“Get back in line,” she told him. “Tell the others to poison the spars of their javelins and guard against fliers.”

The bullock nodded. “And I will guard my tongue,” he said, retreating.

She tossed her head, the vicious upswept horns of a yikarian woman stabbing the night like spears. Yes, guard your tongue, she thought, and mind the words you use. Ninlilah adh Arhapan—Ninlilah, slave of the el Arhapans—

was not a sultana but a sergeant, because this was no herd of yikaria, but a platoon of minotaurs.

Just as the lost heir of the Arhapans, Marod yn Marod was the son who bore the father's name. Never mind the teasing name by which the house slaves called him, giving him another mother after his blessed Valandra died. He was Marod yn Marod; not Marod yn Ninlilah.



Cephas had them. Marashan and the young genasi seated in a roiling knot around her, and the younger children scattered among the crowd; all watched Cephas with their eyes wide, amazed by his displays of prodigious strength. Elder Lin and the other adults wore broad smiles, and Flek leaned forward so far he must have been close to tumbling out of his seat, an expression on his face that managed to combine deep suspicion with careful study.

"Find the fellow who thinks he can best you as soon as you can," Tobin told him at one of their lessons. "And mark him, so the clowns will know who to pull out when you need the volunteer." When Cephas asked if the script ran any differently if the fellow who thought he could best the strongman was, instead, a woman, the goliath was mystified. "I have known women who are stronger than me, Cephas," he said, "but none of them ever needed to show it off for an audience. It will be a fellow."

Cephas was glad it was a fellow he knew, as he sensed Flek would take the act with good humor. Even more, he was glad the clowns and the roustabouts were clearly enjoying the show. He had spent his life in performances, though he never knew it until the last few days. The thrill it gave him tonight was new, untethered from the possibility of death.

The act proceeded as planned. Cephas lifted boulders and bent bars, tossed barrels full of nails from one end of the tent to the other, and even, once they were fastened into

the special canvas chairs backed with stout handles, juggled Elder Lin and two other women of the village.

The juggling worried him. He had not yet mastered the steady rhythms of the art, and he found that he did best when he watched one of the clowns who coached him, mirroring his tosses and catches. Corvus had hit on the trick of having Whitey stand behind the audience and juggle batons, giving Cephas a model to follow.

It worked well, though Cephas was confused when it was Tobin, not Whitey, who acted as his unseen prompter. The confusion grew when Whitey *did* make an appearance, but not in his clowning gear.

“A great display of skill,” said Whitey from the ringmaster’s place. “But not of strength, for surely the women of Argentor can never be said to be burdens. Why, my heart is lightened just watching these ladies float through the air. Applaud your elders, Argentor!”

The tone and color of Whitey’s patter differed from Corvus’s ominous pronouncements and raucous cries. Where could the kenku be? Cephas wondered.

But only briefly, because now it was time to bring up the proof of goods, as Tobin called it. The clowns elicited laughter with tricks and pratfalls, the aerialists earned their cheers with feats most would never dare, and Mattias and Trill … Well, Mattias and Trill were a frightening old man and a vicious predator recreating one of the deadliest episodes in history. The audience trusted the other performers on instinct.

“See,” Tobin told him, “a strongman does something that they think one of them could do, or that any of them could fake.”

And so the finale.

Tobin, or Tuber rather, made an elaborate farce of picking a volunteer from the crowd. Candle moved through the stands with enormous steps, wallowing her way among the old and young alike, rejecting every able-bodied young man

Tuber picked with derisive toots of her horn or gouts of colored ribbon shot from a crossbow made of balloons.

Eventually, Candle offered *herself* as the opponent in the finale's contest of strength. Tuber reacted by setting himself against her instead of letting Cephas take the spotlight again. A few quick pratfalls and failed lifts led to the two clowns' attempt to raise a platform off the ground while they stood on it. Finally, Tuber lifted Candle over his head and threw her into the audience.

This last bit was an innovation, an addition to the act that made Tobin uncomfortable. "I am a *clown* now," he had said. "Yes," Whitey told him, "and you're the strongest clown in the world. You think we're not going to use that? Nine Hells, you think *I* wouldn't throw my sister across the tent if I could?"

So, the intercession of the clowns ended with Candle in a graceless, spinning flight that was nevertheless perfectly timed and executed. She landed precisely where she wanted to—in Flek's lap.

"You there!" Whitey shouted. "Unhand that clown!"

Flek realized he was to be the lucky volunteer. "All right, Cephas," he said, rising to his feet and setting Candle down on hers, "I will test my strength against yours." The good-natured roar of approval from the crowd was accompanied by several less-than-delicate whistles and shrill wishes of good luck from the girls sitting with Marashan. She quieted her friends with sharp elbows and rolling eyes.

Cephas grinned and held out his hand, welcoming the other young man to the ring. Cephas was a warrior, trained in harsh conditions all his life. He was not the equal of Tobin in raw strength, but it was a close thing. None in the audience could doubt he was possessed of enormous musculature after a single glance. He was stronger than Flek.

For all that, Cephas had been impressed with the young earthsouled man's grit and wiry strength when Flek taught

him the earthshock, the gathering and release of power that every member of this audience mastered at a far younger age than Cephas. He owed Flek.

“Any man can lift and throw,” Cephas shouted, “but only those who have the greatest strength, and who have *mastered* that strength, can wield the double flail!”

With that, he flipped over one of the hollow boulders, revealing the weapon stand that it hid from view. He retrieved Azad the Free’s prize and made a few flashy passes with the chains, spinning the spiked heads and releasing just enough of his tectonic energy to throw spirals of dust into the air.

When the miniature sandstorms died away, he offered the weapon to Flek, who eyed the flail suspiciously. The young man only took it after more than one nervous glance in the general direction of his mother. When its weight rested in his hands, he raised his eyebrows.

Flek called over his shoulder to his fellow villagers. “You know, it really is quite heav—”

He did not finish the sentence, because at that moment, the unmoving form of Trill, blood streaming from a dozen wounds, dropped through the canvas ceiling into the center ring.



The genasi of Argentor did not mistake the eruption of noise and violence around them as part of the circus performance for even a moment. The whipping guy wires and shattered smoke pots Trill bore down to the sawdust would not have allowed any such mistake to stand for long, in any case. But the genasi proved coolheaded in dangerous circumstances.

For a moment, Cephus stared in shock. He started moving only when Flek stepped in front of him and handed the flail back.

“Listen!” he shouted, both to Cephas and the crowd, “There is fighting outside!”

The tent became a tumult of motion and noise. Only after Whitey and Tobin rushed to Trill’s side did Cephas notice that she was not saddled, and that Mattias was nowhere to be seen. When Candle whipped off her wig, stuck a dagger between her teeth, and began a swift handover-hand climb up one of the hanging lines, he saw that a roustabout struggled to gain freedom from a tangle caused by Trill’s crash, and that the man was directly beneath a section of the roof that had caught fire.

A high ululating call sounded, and Cephas wondered if it was a war cry from whatever forces attacked the circus outside. But no, it was Elder Lin, signaling the Argentori to withdraw using a cut opened in the tent behind the stands, where Melda stood waving them through.

When the war cries did come, they were not high.

Low and loud, the bellows at the far end of the tent might have been voiced by demons. The fires spreading across the ceiling and the back wall of the tent made Cephas wonder if he had stumbled into the Abyss. Then he saw Mattias, struggling through falling sailcloth, fighting to drag himself across the sawdust toward Trill, his canes a blur in the smoke.

Figures moved behind him, giving chase, but the old man ignored them. Protectors covered him—Shan and Cynda had returned, and the acrobatics they displayed shamed any performance they might have made for the villagers. Spinning and leaping, ducking and diving, the sisters’ blades rang through the noise of fire and battle and panic.

At last, Cephas caught sight of what attacked them. Taller than he, as tall as Tobin even, armored and stamping, huge warriors pursued the sisters, making ferocious swings with enormous axes. They were bestial and furious, with the heads of cattle and gleaming horns. They were figures out of a nightmare.

Out of *his* nightmare.



He is small. Even though his arms and legs, and any part of him he can see in this dim place, are no different than in the waking world, through all the countless nights of this dream, Cephas comes into it knowing he is small. If nothing else, the towering doors and the great distance he has to climb down from his bed prove that.

His size, though, is not his only inadequacy. There is more wrong with his body than just that.

His feet are bare on the cold, blue floor. That's another part of it—that's something else hateful about him. His feet *are on the* floor.

And he is ugly. He knows that even more surely than he knows he is small. He does not look at his arms and legs again.

There is a sound outside the open door. It is laughter, and that terrifies him. He will have to run, or they will come and laugh at him. He will have to find her so she can hide him.

He rushes to a different door. Walking is … difficult. It must be practiced in secrecy, because it is shameful.

The laughter sounds again, and he runs until a shadow falls over him. He panics but knows not to cry, because that is the worst of his weaknesses. But then he cries, anyway, because the shadow is hers, and she sweeps him up in her unimaginably huge arms. She is so strong, surely she can protect him. She is so wise; surely she can find him a hiding place.

She sings with her strange voice, and the words are senseless because she sings in a slave's language. Then she says words he does understand. "Stay close to us," she says. "We will always be around you."

He knows this is as true as everything else in the dream. He knows that her horns are sharp, but that they will never

be turned against him.

But he knows, too, that she always carries him back….



“Help us, Cephas!” someone cried, snapping him out of his paralysis. He ducked, just in time to avoid a flaming rope that whipped down across the center ring. The voice belonged to Blue, appearing with two of his brothers, all of them made up as clowns and bearing heavy footman’s crossbows empty of quarrels.

Mattias crawled over Trill’s body, which still sprawled motionless under the burning big top and was still, ridiculously, blue. He moved with deliberation, pouring drafts of a clear liquid from a clay jug, dousing each of her wounds. The three minotaurs who chased him into the tent slowed their advance, hampered by the detritus of the collapsing ropeworks and the tumbled blocks of his props, but even more by the martial dance of the twins.

Cephas had imagined they would be a deadly team, but he saw that his imagination was incapable of predicting the threat the women presented together. They did not fight as a team, or as a pair. They fought as a single warrior, one with four lightning-fast hands who could separate and combine, attack, and defend in a way that did not resemble any style Cephas had ever seen. They were beating the three minotaurs. Males, thought Cephas, noting their turned-down horns. But how do I know that?

A pair charging in from the right would flank the women, though. Cephas stepped into the minotaurs’ path, sweeping the flail out before him.

“How do we reload these?” Blue shouted as Cephas engaged the roaring minotaurs. He and his brothers held up the empty crossbows, or at least he and one of his brothers did. The third clown, grunting, made a game attempt at throwing his crossbow at one of Cephas’s opponents.

“*That’s* what you wanted my help with?” Cephas cried, unbelieving. “How did you load them in the first place?” One of the minotaurs bore a greataxe like those wielded by the beasts fighting the twins, but the other wielded a glaive, and Cephas shifted his defenses toward the second foe. “Anyone who uses a polearm is a brute,” Shaneerah always said. “The brutes who think they’re clever use glaives.”

Blue and the other clown must have been satisfied with the result of their brother’s experiment, because a pair of crossbows arced into the shifting triangle Cephas made with the minotaurs. The glaive-wielder was distracted by the makeshift missiles, and Cephas found a lapse in the fighter’s bristling defenses. His distal flailhead wrapped around the glaive’s shaft, gaining momentum before it whipped up and under the creature’s muzzle. Blood sprayed, and the beastly man fell.

“Corvus handed them out before he disappeared into his wagon,” Blue called. “We all shot at the same one, as he said, but he didn’t tell us what to do after that.”

Movement out of the corner of his eye told Cephas that Trill had gained her feet, which would surely end this fight. But no, she wasn’t standing; she was being *lifted*. “Strongest clown in the world,” Cephas observed. More loudly, he said, “Go help Tobin and your brother get Trill out of the tent before it collapses!”

He did not have time to see if the trio followed his directions, because the axeman launched a redoubled assault. The greataxe this bullheaded warrior spun was notched in several places on its cutting edge and pitted with age. The minotaur made an advantage of these imperfections, anticipating the snags and skips the chains of Cephas’s flail made when he tried to trap the axehead. White hairs in the mostly midnight black of the warrior’s broad face added to Cephas’s impression of a grizzled veteran. There would be no lapses of attention from this one.

If only the same could be said for Cephas.

“Cephas!” He did not recognize the voice at first. “Push him toward me!”

Oh no, thought Cephas. Behind the old minotaur, Marashan struggled with the glaive she’d pulled from the grip of the foe Cephas had already bested. She set its base against a flagstone prop, like a hunter setting a spear to receive a boar’s charge.

But a glaive is not a spear, and the soldier engaging Cephas was no dumb animal.

The minotaur did not even turn from Cephas, feinting forward. The thrusting axehead forced Cephas to duck back while the ironshod butt end of the great weapon swung around behind the minotaur, knocking the glaive from Marashan’s fingers with ease. The minotaur’s reflexes were among the sharpest Cephas had ever seen.

Still using both ends of his greataxe, still engaging foes before and behind, the fighter reversed the arc of his swing. Melda’s voice came to mind. “Oxen don’t need eyes in the backs of their heads,” she’d said, responding to some jibe of Tobin’s. “They can see almost all the way around ’em with just the two they got.”

Cephas whipped both flailheads up and in, parrying the swing of the axe, then driving it back. He instantly saw his mistake. The force of Cephas’s strike powered a pivoted blow against Marashan. Defenseless, the girl watched the blunt iron coming. Then, even faster than the axe’s strike, she vanished.

She had fallen to the ground, like the minotaur who came so close to ending her life. Cephas felt a surge of tectonic energy boil up from the ground, its flavor familiar from the times he attempted to match its effects over the long morning. Flek stood above his sprawling sister, his foot planted in the spot from which he’d chosen to launch his attack.

Except it wasn’t an attack, Cephas thought, rushing to capitalize on the minotaur’s fall. That’s not what Flek

intended, and neither was its effect. Flek sent a pulse through the earth to literally undermine her, and Marashan fell clear of the bull warrior's blow. But that force, that shaped strike, Cephas understood, *could* be used in combat.

Not now, Cephas thought, not when I need only strength and skill to finish this fight. The old minotaur spun and rolled on the ground, trying to the last to win clear of the lethal flail, but Cephas's anger burned as hot as the tent around them. This creature had meant to kill Marashan as a *distraction*.

Taking in the whole of the ground meant for performance and now hosting battle, Cephas saw that the clown troupe had made the rent with Trill, though their efforts were hampered by the wyvern's struggling back to consciousness under Mattias's continued ministrations. The ranger's canes were tucked through the back of his belt, and he hobbled along with one hand on Whitey's shoulder while the other still splashed healing ointment over his companion's wounds.

In the center of the tent, the twins continued to fight—the odds evened as one of their foes collapsed onto his knees, making a useless attempt to stop the bloom of blood fountaining from his throat. The wounds that caused that fountain had struck simultaneously, with a chirurgeon's knowledge of anatomy and a gem cutter's precision.

A closer look told him the twins were being pressed. These minotaurs were vicious and brutal, but they coupled those traits with ruthless discipline—a rare and deadly combination, and Cephas hoped that these two were the last of them as he went to aid the twins.

He spotted another—there was at least one more minotaur to fight. The largest he'd yet seen trotted into the far entrance, an archway of flame. She snorted and stamped, and even if her size had not suggested it, her superior arms and armor, and her bearing, marked her as the leader of these mysterious attackers.

She saw Cephas.



Corvus willed himself to ignore the sounds from outside his wagon. The burning of the tent roared as loud as any fires he'd ever set himself, and he heard death in it. He heard death in the screams of the Argentori genasi and in the hoarse directions Melda screamed at her husband's kin. Corvus knew what death sounded like, and he would not listen.

Whitey had pulled him from the ring with a terrified look, then buried it beneath decades of showmanship to keep the audience away from whatever was coming as long as possible. Out in the night, it took Shan a single gesture—a hooking sweep of her hand with first and fourth fingers extended—to tell Corvus what doom had found them.

He would need details later—and he *would have* them, no matter what methods had to be used to glean them—but for the moment his course was set. He'd uncovered the cache of weapons hidden beneath the water barrels and handed them out. He heard Trill on the wing and the eldritch twang of Mattias's bowstring. Shan and Cynda were exhausted but remained upright, and a pair of Arvoreeni adepts on their feet could swing the course of a full military engagement.

He could not imagine why the Calimien would loose El Pajabbar on him at this point in the game, but he knew his people would make it a decision the minotaurs' masters in Calimport would regret.

In his wagon, Corvus passed over his pen and ink and did not even consider drawing out his book. Instead, he took a large conch shell into his clawlike hands.

The WeavePasha's secrecy would be endangered if he used the speaking horn, but secrecy was already compromised, and the human's wizardly pretenses at protocol be damned.

Corvus whistled a note through the ancient conch shell and felt it warm in his hands. As soon as the oceanic whisper issuing from its depths faded, replaced by the sounds of gentle conversation and cutlery clinking against expensive plateware, Corvus knew the audible link to the WeavePasha's earring was established.

"Acham el Jhotos!" he shouted, positive that whoever was dining with the wizard would hear his voice, and that the WeavePasha himself would be clapping a hand to an ear and screaming blood. "Your plans are found out! Your foes descend! Your agent demands aid!"



A scream sounded from above. Trill? thought Cephas, but no, this was a man's scream—a man's dying scream.

Above, Candle tried to approach her brother, who had lost a desperate battle to stay clear of the flames and watched his death burning its way up his legs.

Cephas swore, looking for some way to climb, but all the ropes had burned away and every wall was now fully engulfed. The interior of the tent was brighter and hotter than any day he had ever known. He could only watch Candle, blisters rising through her greasepaint, swing back and forth, trying to gain enough momentum to reach her brother. The man's screams ceased, his body curling in on itself.

The only sounds discernible above the fire were screams—screams from Candle, swinging and hopeless; screams from Flek, dragging his sister clear; screams of fury from the pair of minotaur warriors facing the tiring sisters. There were also the screams of the huge minotaur woman, seeking a path through sheets of burning canvas that fell from every direction.

The woman could not get closer. None in the tent could see a way clear of the small hells each found himself in,

clear of the few patches of earth free of fire.

Earth …

“Shan! Cynda!” Cephas shouted. “To me! You have to find a way to me!”

Cephas began a different sort of defense than any he’d ever had to weave, swinging the flail to knock floating embers away, and ducking clear of gouts of fire. He made his way to Flek and Marashan, finding her unconscious and the young man dazed.

“We cannot get out!” shouted Cephas. “We have to go *down*!”

Flek, vastly more experienced with the powers of the earth than Cephas, saw the gladiator’s plan and nodded.

The twins bounded through the flames, leaving frustrated roars in their wake. Flek took his sister up in his arms as Shan spun her sister around, patting out the wisps of smoke that threatened to make a torch of Cynda’s heavy ponytail.

“Cephas!” Flek shouted. “You must do this! I used all that was in me to buckle the ground beneath Marashan. But it’s soft here now! Dig a cavern, Cephas, some small space that will hold us all. Leave no more room than is needed for air to breathe. Shape it!”

With a tremendous roar, the ceiling gave way. Candle did not struggle as she fell.

Cephas thought of the only small space he could, the place he knew better than any other, the only home he could remember. He set his foot, and the ground below fell away, making a rocky replica of his cell on Jazeerijah.

The twins leaped in, then reached up and pulled Cephas down after them. Flek dropped his sister into Cephas’s arms. He said, “Someone has to remain above to close it in, you see.”

After an instant of fire, there was earth, and Cephas went down beneath it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There is a path running only one direction,
through a gate that never closes.
—The Nar'ysr's Last Prophecy
(apocryphal)

THE WORST OF IT, BY FAR, OCCURRED WHEN SHAN CLOSED her hands around Marashan's mouth and nose.

The girl had fought her way back to consciousness at the sounds of her brother's terrible last cries. Marashan gathered earth-force, and Cephas shouted above the screams.

"No! He does this for you!"

Marashan's breath cut off and she trembled for a moment, then became still. Before Cephas could speak, a small, calloused hand found his and moved his fingers against the genasi girl's neck, where he felt a thin pulse. Shan knew he thought her capable of killing the girl, and wished to ease his mind.

It was that moment, not the long night of waiting that followed, that Cephas kept returning to as he watched the Argentori bury their dead. He supposed it was because that

was the only moment during the long and terrible night of waiting when they were moving, *acting*. Otherwise, they had not spoken and barely stirred except to draw shallow breaths.

On Jazeerijah, the dead were thrown over the side for scavengers to find, but more than one of the Founding Stories took the tomb cities of the desert for their setting. He knew what a grave was.

Maybe Elder Lin sensed his worry that this dirt cell would become their grave when she detected their life-forces in the smoldering canvas ruins. She had caused the ground her son shielded them beneath to explode outward. Even aware that the remains at her feet were those of Flek, she took the time to look all four of them in the eye, speaking to the twins and Cephas as gently as to her own daughter, saying, “You are alive.” It was not an exclamation of relief. It was a reminder.

She issued other reminders as she opened the cracks in the center spires of the village, six in all. These would hold the remains of those earthsouled who died by fire or blade. “The Old Mother birthed these souls,” she said, “and now the Old Mother gathers them back up. They died in violence, but they lived in peace, so their sleep shall be untroubled. The earth abides.”

All the villagers, and many of the circus folk, were gathered at the spires. The genasi answered their elder with an echo. “The earth abides,” and some among the circus troupe whispered other imprecations and blessings. The circus would bury its own dead in the afternoon.

In addition to Candasa—the clown Candle—four others of Whitey’s family had died the previous night. The man Candasa tried so hard to save had been Kip, the youngest of them all. Cephas did not believe he had ever spoken to the boy.

Micha and Green Beth, two other clowns, died when they tried to roll the burning roof back onto its scrollworks. One

more of Whitey’s family lay in a cool cave offered by Elder Lin, swaddled in soft bandages and driving a hard bargain with the Lord of the Dead. This was his wife, Melda, who took a minotaur’s axe and rushed into the burning fall of the southernmost canvas wall when it settled over the stone kraal where her oxen were stabled. She led every team free before she collapsed.

Now the troupe waited on word of Tobin and Mattias, who had disappeared into the spires before dawn. Trill was tied down, her efforts to take flight pathetic but dangerous to any who came near, so the goliath volunteered to accompany the old man in her stead.

From the fire, the efforts of Cephas and the twins, and his arrows, Mattias counted eleven dead minotaurs. Down on the road, where Trill descended on the attackers like an angel of death, the roustabouts found the corpses of twelve more, along with the lances and javelins they had used to poison the wyvern.

“Twenty-five,” Corvus told his old friend. “El Pajabbar always number twenty-five.”

Mattias nodded, signaled Tobin, and faded away, silent on his canes.

Escorted by Elder Lin, Cephas and the twins arrived at the wagons as they were leaving.

“I should go with them,” Cephas said.

“They should not go,” said the Elder.

Corvus shook his head, though it was unclear to which of them he was responding. “All the decisions are being made elsewhere,” he said, as if to himself. “That has to change.”



Sword in hand, Ariella Kulmina appeared in the air above the lowered facade of a circus wagon. Smoke rose in the near distance, turning the first rays of dawn a red that bathed the spires around her in a light the color of blood.

No living thing stirred.

The silver-skinned woman floated to the ground, holding her blade in a high guard position, and sent out her awareness, wary of enemies concealed by magic.

The enemy that found her did not strike from concealment.

Unbelievably fast, an earthsouled fighter in the regalia of a gladiator sprang from between two wagons, spinning an enormous double-headed flail as easily as a child wielding a sling. The swordmage had been told the genasi of the village were pacifists, but she had stepped through the WeavePasha's teleportation portal with defenses raised nonetheless.

A lucky thing that was, or the spiked heads of the flail would have struck her down instantly. Instead, she breathed a syllable and brought her long sword down in a parrying arc. One flail head bounced off the eldritch shield raised at her command, and her sword struck the other with enough force to send it swinging wide.

The gladiator took her actions in stride, springing back lightly and setting his weapon to swinging in a figure-eight pattern that would be impossible to penetrate with just a sword.

Ariella had more than her sword to give battle with.

Mimicking the gladiator, she backed away from close contact. But with another arcane word and a flick of her wrist, a crackling line of energy extended from her weapon's tip like a whip. She swept this extension of her will in an arc beneath the earthsouled's defenses, surprising him. The line wrapped around the man's ankles and, using both hands and all her strength, she raised her sword high above her head.

The earthsouled man's feet flew out beneath him, and he landed flat on his back, while the eldritch whip bound his legs tightly together. Approaching warily, Ariella saw there was no fear in the man's face. Instead, she saw only

exhaustion and grief. And she swore she heard something from inside him—something that reminded her of the wind.

The man was staring up at her. He made no move to raise his weapon. “You are not a minotaur,” he said.

Ariella pursed her lips in confusion, but answered him. “And you are not a pacifist.”



The Argentori removed every sign of the previous night’s terrible occurrences with remarkable speed. They finished interring their dead, respectfully assisted Whitey’s family in the ceremony of their own tradition, then buried the signs of conflagration beneath the stones. The ground, at least, bore no scars.

The genasi also carried away the bodies of the minotaurs, no doubt to a gentler end than would have come if the circus folk had taken charge of the grisly task. Shock was passing from most faces now, except perhaps that of Whitey, the master clown who looked so stunned and haunted. The others were asking questions among themselves.

“Wait for Mattias to return from his hunt,” Corvus told them, and refused to say anything more. He would not even introduce the mysterious swordswoman who had apparently arrived at his request.

“She is windsouled,” the grieving Sonnett told Cephas. “She is genasi, like us.”

Sonnett was in the Welcome Terrace, working with her kin to restore the place to the function intended by its name. She looked to her mother’s serenity and made a great effort to match it. Cephas watched the crystal-haired windsouled woman study everything around her, and thought of the near-deadliness of their first encounter. Like me, perhaps, thought Cephas in silent reply to gentle Sonnett. Not like you.

And not like shattered Marashan, who had not left the spire where her brother now rested forever. The girl had spoken to no one—not even to her mother and especially not to Cephas, at whom she would not even look. She sat with her back against the spire, rocking and keening, arms wrapped around her knees.

“There is a storm inside my daughter,” Elder Lin told Cephas when he struggled to apologize. “You did not ignite it. Even those horned slaves of the Calimien did not plant it within her. It has always been there, and shielding her from the world has not prepared her for the way it tosses her heart now. But I knew no other way.”

Cephas had no reply, and Blue came for him then, dashing his hope that the Elder might explain further.

“My brother’s wife will live,” Blue said as they made their way back to the wagons. “I always said he’d married an ox, not an ox maiden. That strength is showing.”

Cephas clapped the man on the shoulder, relieved. “Perhaps I can show you how to work a crossbow later,” he said.

Blue shook his head. “No need,” he said. “My brothers and I had the ringmaster teach us while the rest of you buried our kin.”

Corvus had set out a circle of canvas chairs around a small campfire. He, the twins, the windsouled woman, and Whitey sat talking. As Cephas approached, he saw Mattias and Tobin joining the group. The two wore grim expressions.

Cephas joined the circle, finding a seat between Whitey and the swordswoman.

Corvus waited for them all to settle themselves, then spoke. “This is Ariella Kulmina, a swordmage of Akanûl, a land ruled by genasi like the Emirates.”

The woman protested. “Not at all like the Emirates—”

Corvus waved her to silence. “Last night I appealed to the WeavePasha of Almraiven, our sponsor in this mad business, for aid against our attackers. He was sharing a meal with the

swordmage, and she volunteered to travel here by means of his magics. We will speak more of this in a moment. First, I would hear what you found out there in the spires, Mattias.”

By way of answer, the old man spilled open a roll of roughly woven cloth. Two sets of horns, still joined by the polled ridges of bone they grew from, clattered onto the stone.

The woman of Akanûl breathed in sharply, and even Whitey turned his empty eyes away.

Corvus said, “I make that twenty-four.”

Mattias nodded at Tobin. For the first time, Cephas noticed how wan the big man appeared. He had the thin-skinned appearance of a gladiator sent back into the arena too soon, with only a hedge shaman’s inadequate chants closing his wounds. Tobin had been in a dreadful fight, and recently.

The goliath turned something over and over in his hands—the jagged end of a single horn, dried blood crusting its broken end. “I could not hold her,” he said. “She was so strong. So terribly strong.”

Cephas realized the whole company was staring at him, and he looked down to see that he had risen to his feet. He shook his head, began to apologize, but then decided to give voice to the question so unaccountably important to him. “She lives? The minotaur woman who led the attack—she escaped you?”

Mattias answered. “Aye. And retreated south toward the mountains, running fast and alone. Tobin took her measure, and she’ll not forget him. But I am glad she fled, and I hope never to face her again.”

Cephas sat, feelings of relief and unease and bewilderment warring inside.

Whitey spoke. “What do you mean, ‘our sponsor in this business,’ Ringmaster?” There was an edge to his voice Cephas had not heard before.

“Old friend,” Corvus said, and Whitey shocked them all by savagely cutting his hand across his chest. He knew how to

stand in for the kenku in the ring, and he knew the kenku's means of imposing quiet.

"Employee," he said. "I am your employee, Corvus, in a *circus*. Your other activities, all the shadow games those of you sitting here get up to, you know they're no secret to me. I knew what the score was when I signed my family on, and I signed anyway, because you pay well and you have access to routes nobody else does. But most importantly, Corvus, because you swore, you *swore to me*, that our worlds would not intersect. You swore to me that my family would never be in danger because of something you did."

There was a long silence. Then Corvus sighed. "Whitey, the attack last night, Melda's wounds, they cannot be blamed—"

And this time it was Mattias who interrupted, though he required only a soft word to silence Corvus.

"No," he said. "No, Corvus. He is right. We set no fires, we put our hands on no axes, but he is right. Nine Hells, I don't know half of what you're stirring up right now myself, but I do know that Candle and Kip and the others would be breaking down the tent right now if we were nothing more than circus performers."

Corvus did not immediately respond. He waited so long to speak that the silence, uncomfortable to begin with, grew almost desperate. Cephas searched his memories for some experience that would offer succor or solution, but found nothing. There was too much he did not know.

Finally, Corvus said, "If we were nothing but circus performers, Candasa and Kip would be buried on their father's farm in the grainlands north of Elturel"—Whitey started to stand, but Corvus had suffered the last interruption he would countenance—"dead like their parents from plague in the Year of the Second Circle."

Whitey, unimpressed, held his hands wide, shaking his head.

Corvus spoke on. “If we were nothing more than circus performers, then Tobin Tok Tor would still be haunting the Riftedge, chased by dwarf patrols and clanless.

“And wouldn’t Melda, your *wife*, Whitey, have died with her sisters and their herds if we had not come across her fighting druid-fettered wolves all alone?”

Only Cephas and, he noticed, the Akanûlan Ariella Kulmina, still watched Corvus, who had risen to his feet and circled the campfire. All the veterans of the circus stared at the ground.

“I have broken no vows. And I have gone *far* beyond the requirements of our covenant. Our worlds will not intersect? I said no such thing, Whitey. I promised to *protect* you and yours from the shadows that haunt this spell-blasted, god-torn, tyrant’s playground of a world, and I have done that. I have done that more than any of you know. *Any* of you.” The last three words he said standing before Mattias.

“And now I will do still more. When the sun sets, I will accompany this woman back to Almraiven. The WeavePasha will open a portal. Some of you will accompany me. The rest will stay here until Melda is recovered. Then Whitey will lead the circus north in rebadged wagons.”

The clown was confused. “I had no intention—”

“I suggest you make for Cormyr. I have a legitimate-looking Player’s Writ packed away somewhere, so you’ll not have to pay their fees. With luck, you should cross the Bridge of Fallen Men in time for the autumn fetes and festivals.”

Whitey said, “You are *giving* me your circus, Corvus?”

Corvus said, “For a time. I may one day reclaim it. I make no promises.”

There was no humor in Whitey’s answering laugh. “I will go and speak with Melda and Blue, then.” He looked at the others. “All of you are welcome to come with us. All of you *should.”* With that, he left.

Corvus took his seat. “He’s right, of course. Make no mistake, the attack last night was not made on the order of a one-horned she-minotaur. And yes, Mattias, I know more than I have told you, just as always. The minotaurs came for our newest member and were sent by people whose enmity I never sought. But if you go with Whitey, Cephas, you’ll draw other attacks.”

Cephas did not understand what possible link he might have to the tragedy that had befallen them. “I will go with you, Corvus,” he said. “But I have done nothing I know of to cause this. My only enemies are those I bested on the canvas at Jazeerijah, and Azad and the other freedmen, I suppose.”

“You suppose,” Corvus said with a chuckling sound. “ ‘A slave is always the enemy of his master,’ ” he said.

Cephas pursed his lips. “I know that saying. Or I have heard something very like it.”

The windsouled woman spoke, her accent strange, but her words clear and voiced in tones that reminded Cephas of bells—specifically of the bells that jingled on a weapon harness. “It’s from one of those old stories the humans of Calimshan valued so highly. I read hundreds of them in Akanûl before we came south, in preparation for our meetings with the WeavePasha.”

“Not Bashan Reaver,” said Cephas. “Another one.”

The woman shrugged. “There are dozens of escaped slave narratives in the *Book of Founding Stories*, the histories, the songs. They all end the same way.”

Cephas thought about that for a moment. “The slave always dies gloriously, or else goes back to his master to better the lives of his friends still in chains.” He paused, sifting through the implications of what she said. Surely there was some exception.... “I never thought of it,” he eventually admitted, “but Azad never told a story that ended with a slave alive and free.”

The woman sniffed. “Of course not. That’s the whole point. Who is Azad? A genasi slaver of the Skyfire Emirates?”

“A human,” Corvus answered for Cephas. “An escaped slave himself, and a man whose motivations have proven unknowable thus far. Especially his motive in bringing Cephas out of the desert.”

“Is that why these people seek me?” asked Cephas. “Was I the property of some other genasi who wishes to retrieve me after all this time?”

“Something very like that,” said Corvus. “To be honest, I cannot be sure. I believe you to be connected to the windsouled families who rule the city of Calimport, and have sought proof of that in the Herald’s records in Saradush and by consulting with the Elder Lin, who has great expertise in the *szuldar* lines of the earthsouled clans. The Calimien are the great enemies of the humans ruled by the WeavePasha, and he has long sought some leverage to use in his endless negotiations staving off war. Word came to me of a genasi living with slaves escaped from Calimport, and I sent Mattias to investigate. The rest, you know.”

Cephas shook his head. The kenku had dodged answering fully again by offering crumbs of truth. He was sure there was more.

But Corvus continued. “And what you don’t know, what we all need to know, can be learned from the WeavePasha himself now that he is forced into the game. The human has extraordinary resources, and his magics are among the greatest of his race.”

For some reason he couldn’t name, Cephas turned to Ariella for guidance, though of all these people—who grew more mysterious the longer he knew them—he knew her the least.

The woman shrugged. “He is a powerful sorcerer. He has powerful enemies.”

Cephas nodded. “I have already said I’ll go with you, Corvus.” And I’ll find out who the horned woman is, he

thought, and what you have not told me.

Corvus looked to the others, though he need only have looked to Mattias. Cynda would follow Shan, and of all the circus folk, Shan was the most unquestioning in her loyalty to the kenku. Tobin watched Mattias, though Cephas would have guessed his heart told him to follow his fellow clowns.

“Well, old man,” asked Corvus, “will Trill be ready to move? The WeavePasha knows to weave his gate large enough for her to pass through.”

Exhaustion hung over Mattias. He looked, thought Cephas, so very old.

The fire had burned down, and the late-hour chill of a spring afternoon was in the stones. Sunset was not far off.

Corvus said once more, “Will Trill be ready to move?”

Mattias did not answer aloud, but he nodded.



Ariella Kulmina had not left Cephas’s side since the talk at the campfire.

“See the symbols your ringmaster has scribed around the circle there?” Ariella asked him. “The WeavePasha has them recorded in an enormous book along with hundreds of others. He can use them to open paths across the world that can be traveled with a single step.”

The others had, along with good-byes to make, personal belongings to gather, or, in the case of Corvus, preparations of a more secretive nature. Cephas pulled the leather satchel he used to store his armor from beneath the seat of the wagon and laid it next to his flail, and with that he had gathered all his worldly possessions. He did not feel he should interrupt the mourning Argentori to give any farewells.

Besides, he found he was content to stay close to the windsouled swordswoman, since she was no longer trying to kill him. Ariella reminded him of Sonnett and Shaneerah and

even Grinta the Pike, all at the same time. Not long into their conversation, Cephas had been struck by the knowledge that he could count on the fingers of his hands the number of women with whom he had spoken. There was something about this woman that set her apart from the others, even beyond her exotic accent and her skin that matched the color of high clouds in early morning.

Cephas cursed at his inability to figure her out. Is she like those others, or is she something new? She can't be both, he thought.

Unless … Cephas remembered a trick of the arena. When faced with an opponent using unfamiliar arms or armor, or some beast with a way of fighting unlike any other, then the first thing to do was to decide what, in the gladiator's experience, was *closest* to the new opponent. Take care, raise the broadest of defenses, and learn the other combatant's ways, following the clues provided by similarities. An orc with a folding mace like none he'd ever seen did not fight as a brutish goblin with a stone club, but both foes bore heavy, blunt instruments. What he knew about one, he could use against the other.

"Planning to attack me again?" she asked.

"What?" Cephas replied. Arms wide, he was crouched, presenting a flat profile so that a swing from an unedged weapon would skip across his chest instead of finding a landing place for a heavy impact.

"You are holding yourself as if you think I am about to engage, Cephas Earthsouled, though you should have learned by now that I could spit you like a pig if I chose."

If Sonnett's taking his hand the day before caused his cheeks to burn, this woman made every bit of his skin glow with embarrassment just by speaking. "I am"—he cleared his throat—"practicing my act."

The woman laughed. This made things worse.

He was desperate to change the subject. "Am I to call you Ariella Windsouled, then? None of the genasi here in

Argentor used the words that way, as names.”

She shrugged. “If you like. I say that because I know no other name for you beyond Cephas, and among my people, using a single name implies familiarity. You seem uncomfortable with familiarity.” She laughed again.

This was a familiar sensation, at least, having spent so many years under Grinta’s tutelage. “You are mocking me,” he said.

“Yes, a bit,” she said.

To Cephas’s enormous relief, the twins approached Corvus’s wagon, each lightly burdened with haversacks and wearing bandoliers bristling with row upon row of the silvered darts they favored.

“Here’s another pair of warriors,” he said.

Ariella said, “To say the least. The WeavePasha named them among the kenku’s allies when he accepted my offer to come north. I had hoped to meet them, and I am happy they came through the fire with you. In Airspur, it is believed that no Arvoreeni adepts survive. I am glad that belief is wrong.”

Cephas said, “They’re rangers, I thought. Students of Mattias.”

The twins joined them, and Ariella shared with Cephas the smile she offered them. “To say the least,” she said.

An odd rushing sound came from behind them. On the lowered platform next to the wagon, a dim green glow manifested out of nothing, twisting shapes into the air and causing a light, inward flowing breeze to draw the dust of the terrace into a spiral.

Mattias returned, mounted atop Trill, who had her wing tips bound together above her lashing tail with lengths of leather, preventing flight.

“Clear out of the way,” called Mattias. “It’s best if we go through first, and she’s in an irritable mood after being left behind this morning.”

Trill grumbled and snapped as she made her way awkwardly to the portal. She normally used her wings to aid

her balance when she went about on her two legs, and with them confined, her gait was even more like that of an enormous chicken than usual. Cephas had known the wyvern long enough to school his features into a respectful expression.

The ranger did not speak again; he did not, in fact, even acknowledge them as he passed. Trill did not hesitate next to the platform any longer than it took her to bring her enormous clawed feet together, bend her legs, and hop forward. If the gate had not been there, she would have crashed into the wagon, no doubt overturning it. As it was, she and Mattias simply vanished.

Ariella raised her eyebrows at the twins. “He really does have a wyvern,” she said. “And she’s traveled through a portal before. This is quite a circus—I regret I did not see you perform.” With that, she followed Trill through in two easy strides.

Cephas stood, unsure of whether he should wait or go after her when Corvus and Tobin walked around from the front of the wagon. Corvus muttered something into his hand, then pitched a bit of tinder beneath the wheels. “Best we all go through now,” he said. “Whitey knows to let the wagon burn.”

Cephas hoped never to see anything burn again, beyond cookfires and lamp wicks. The flames licking the underside of Corvus’s wagon were more than enough to overcome any unease he felt about walking through the portal.

Tobin stepped next to Cephas. “I have my hammer,” he said. “Do you know, Cephas, I thought I would never have to use it again? I liked the crossbows made of balloons better.”

The twins passed through. Cephas saw Shan draw her wicked parrying dagger at the last instant, ready for battle despite Corvus’s assurances they would reappear in a safe place.

Corvus would go through last.

“Why do you not go with Whitey and the others?” Cephas asked Tobin.

Tobin looked at Corvus, who motioned him on through. The goliath disappeared.

Corvus said, “Tuber died in the fire with the other clowns, Cephas. Now go. You’ve nothing to be afraid of.”

Cephas had trained for most of his life to never show fear, because, the Calishites said, fear was a quick path to death.

He set his foot on the path before him.



When blurred vision returned to her right eye, Ninlilah realized it was not pain that had blinded her, but blood. She had managed to escape the powerful foes who tracked her into the depths of the Spires only by sacrificing one of her horns in a desperate toss of her head that threw the goliath’s body between her and the arrows of the crippled archer.

She did not dare approach the genasi village now, but neither would she make contact with the master of games. She had been reminded of older, truer oaths than those that bound her to the slaveholding windsouled of Calimport and the djinn who lived among them.

She turned south, wondering if old allies yet lived.

CHAPTER NINE

The sha’ir who does not seek
the origin of magic is a coward.
The sha’ir who believes there is one is a fool.
—“Clever Janna and the Third Sha’ir”
The Founding Stories of Calimshan

ALMRAIVEN, THE CITY OF SPELLS, HAD STOOD BY THE Shining Sea for more than seven thousand years, despite the sea’s best efforts.

More than once in the city’s unthinkably long history, some sultan or potentate managed to offend a goddess who responded with enormous waves crashing over the high seawalls of the port. More than once, some magic user drunk on power called up creatures from the fathomless depths, hoping to harness their inhuman might, only to die with tens of thousands of others when the beasts breathed clouds of madness and sorcery through the ancient streets.

When the sea could not defeat the city, it sought retreat. The coastline of southern Faerûn had changed a dozen times in the city’s life. Other cities drowned when the sea rushed

in, or dried up when it disappeared over the southern horizon, but Almraiven endured. Whether by a god's whim, the work of wizards of enormous power, or through simple luck, Almraiven still stood by the sea. It still thrived.

And it had endured more than oceanic threats. Fires mundane and magical, plagues of disease and of pests, drought and rebellion, and the yoke of foreign tyrants—all these befell Almraiven down the fantastically long roll of years that made up its history.

The city was conquered by human armies and by dragons, razed by alien orbs chattering indecipherable nightmare languages, and then rebuilt by freed slaves who cast off their shackles for a generation or two before finding it expedient to forge the chains again when some enemy force exhausted itself in another doomed attempt to wipe out Almraiven once and for all.

Almost anything that could be imagined occurring in a city of the South had occurred there a dozen times.

"Except for one thing," the WeavePasha told Cephas. "Almraiven has never been conquered by the mad tyrants of the Elemental Chaos. Neither djinni nor efreeti has ever ruled her. No other city in these lands can make that claim."

The human proved a generous host. Cephas and his companions were met the previous night by dozens of servants who offered them food and wine, hot baths, and cool silk sheets. They had yet to enter the palace, but each of the travelers was given his own vast tent, divided into multiple chambers by gauzy curtains and screens of an aromatic wood that let a scent like blooming flowers and cedar fill the air when it was warmed by the first rays of sunrise.

Cephas rose, dressed in loose cotton pants and an open-necked tunic, and considered what to do with his flail and armor, which were secreted beneath the huge round bed he'd slept on through the night.

He recognized his surroundings from stories. This was the home of a king. He decided to carry his possessions, but not don them.

In the courtyard, a horseshoe-shaped table stood next to a bubbling fountain. It was low to the ground, surrounded by cushions instead of chairs, and overflowed with platters of foodstuffs, vases of flowers, pitchers of chilled fruit juices, and carafes of fine wines. At least, that was Cephas's best guess as to what constituted the enormous plenty. He could only be sure that he recognized a platter of oranges. He had once watched the freedman Talid win such in a game of dice with a caravan guard, only to devour the five bright fruits so quickly that he vomited them up.

Tobin was taking little time to savor the morningfeast himself, and Cephas hoped the goliath's constitution would aid him in keeping down the enormous quantities of food he consumed at a steady pace. The only other person who sat at the table, a human and a stranger to Cephas, sat watching Tobin, clearly impressed.

The gray-haired man wore a short beard, neatly trimmed and oiled to a point. He smiled and beckoned for Cephas to join them. His manner was relaxed, but Cephas saw that he was armed with an ornate dagger thrust through a corded belt. Otherwise, he was dressed much like Cephas and Tobin.

"Welcome to my table, friend," the old man said. "I am Acham yn Aban el Jhotos yi Almraiven, Caleph Arcane of the Alcazar, Pasha of the Guild Arcane, and humbled to serve this ancient city as its Sultan Supreme."

Tobin spoke around a mouthful of mutton. "Corvus says we're to call him 'Your Grace.' Or 'WeavePasha.' "

The man smiled and nodded. "Yes, those are appropriate. It is unfortunate, but no whisper in this place falls only on the ears it was meant for, and my vizars are much invested in the formalities of rank and station. Even old friends such as Corvus Nightfeather and honored guests such as you and

this redoubtable goliath must keep the forms, lest I find myself being tutored in protocol by my grandchildren.”

Cephas sat next to the WeavePasha at the man’s waved invitation and made a careful study of the closest platters. A heavy plate, gilded and empty, lay before him. He saw no utensils, but Tobin apparently violated no protocols in eating with his hands. Cephas tentatively reached for a bunch of purple fruits, glistening with condensation, and set them on his plate. As if sensing his reticence, the WeavePasha said, “Please, allow me to serve you.”

Cephas leaned back, expecting the man to take his plate, but instead, the WeavePasha clapped twice. A dizzying array of fruits, meats, and flatbreads flew from every direction, and Cephas ducked, sure he was about to be pelted with the food. Instead, an artfully arranged meal settled down onto his plate.

Before he could give the WeavePasha his thanks, Ariella took a seat beside him. “Good morning, honored WeavePasha,” she said. “I see that Cephas is impressed by your famously generous table. You will forgive your humble guest, I pray. He is new to the ways of the wider world.”

The WeavePasha said, “Yes, I was about to ask him about that, in fact. And good morning to you, Mistress Kulmina. Your countrymen have awaited your return most anxiously.”

An unpleasant look Cephas hadn’t seen before came to the windsouled woman’s face—one that unaccountably troubled him—but she said only, “I am sure.”

“Now, young man,” said the WeavePasha, surprising Cephas by taking his hand, “what am I to call you? Your friends name you Cephas, and I know the spymaster believes you to be connected to the windsouled el Arhapan pashas of the Calimien. Are you Cephas el Arhapan yi Calimport, then?”

Cephas frowned. “I—I am Cephas, Your Grace. It is the only name I’ve known, though Ariella has called me Cephas Earthsouled. The freedmen I was raised among had other

names for me, but I hope you will not ask me to answer to those."

The WeavePasha's broad smile faded. "No, of course not. Cephas you have been and Cephas you shall be. At least until you decide to be someone else."

Cephas selected one of the glistening purple fruits he'd chosen for himself before the WeavePasha filled his plate. "Is that something one can do in Almraiven? Decide to be someone else?"

This time the wizard's grin was rueful and accompanied by a shrug. "A fair enough question. Though unexpected from one who travels in the company of a kenku who has as many names as he does voices."

Tobin paused in his chewing. "I have known Corvus for many years," he said. "His was the first name I learned outside those of my clansmen. I believe it to be his real name."

The WeavePasha nodded in acknowledgment. "It is the one they gave in the rookeries in his youth, yes."

Tobin and Cephas were taken aback by the idea of Corvus as a child, and even Ariella gave the WeavePasha a long, considering look. "You knew the ringmaster when he was young?" asked Tobin.

The WeavePasha laughed. "Let us say I knew *of* him, at least. Just as I know of these two extraordinary halflings by their reputations." Shan and Cynda, in the same fighting leathers they'd passed through the portal wearing, approached the table. The WeavePasha greeted them in a language Cephas did not recognize, full of lilting, songlike sounds and phrases.

The women bowed. Shan tensed at something the WeavePasha said, but sat when her sister did.

"You will forgive me, I trust, for welcoming your friends in their own tongue. I sought to make them comfortable after their restless night checking the boundaries of the garden and seeking a way into the palace. It is my hope that they

will both sleep through the night should you grace this house with your company for another day.”

“I’ve never known them to both be asleep at the same time,” said Mattias. Like the sisters, the old ranger had not followed Tobin’s and Cephas’s example in wearing the garments the WeavePasha’s servants left in the tents. The bit of straw stuck in his grizzled beard suggested he had not even made use of the bed, but slept with Trill in the nest prepared for her in a drained fountain.

For the first time, the WeavePasha stood. He met Mattias halfway across the courtyard, and bowed to him, though the ranger did not return the act. “Mattias Farseer,” he said. “Oldest friend of my old friend. You are welcome here, as ever.”

Mattias nodded. “El Jhotos,” he said, and that was apparently all the greeting he planned to make. “Shan tells me Corvus has already disappeared. Will he return today, or will Trill continue to work her way through your kitchener’s goat herd?”

The WeavePasha was unflappable. “I have many goats. Enough even for that one’s hunger. And look here at your friends, so politely seeing to their own appetites.” Cephas noticed the wizard had avoided answering Mattias’s question about Corvus.

He noticed, too, that the ranger walked past the WeavePasha without looking the man in the face. Cephas judged them to be roughly the same age, though the WeavePasha’s back was straight and he was more heavily muscled than the wiry ranger. Their skin tones differed as well, with the WeavePasha having the same olive skin as the freedmen of the mote and Mattias’s being only a shade or two darker than the white face paint used in the circus.

But for all their differences, there was something they shared, some ineffable quality Cephas could not quite put his finger on. He could not say why, but he felt sure that if he had ever gone onto Azad’s canvas and found one of

these men waiting for him, he would have been facing his last opponent.

With a sigh, Mattias settled down next to Tobin and leaned his canes against the table. The goliath made one of his attempts at a whisper.

“Corvus says we’re to call him WeavePasha. And it will make his grandchildren angry if we do not.”

Mattias shot a sour look at Tobin but did not answer. He drew a dagger from his belt, stabbed a thick slice of spiced beef, and sniffed it before depositing it on the empty plate before him.

“Do not fret, son of stone,” the WeavePasha said to Tobin, returning to his place between Cephas and Ariella. “My grandchildren know there are exceptions granted in certain rare cases.”

The WeavePasha indicated Mattias’s canes. “Those still serve you well, I trust? My vizars have written monographs about their making. They say they’re among my finest work.”

Mattias discovered the straw stuck in his hair. He pulled it out and inserted it in a bowl of bright green jelly, where it stood straight up, like a lone tree on a plain of quivering mint. “They were a present from Corvus. It seemed impolite to ask where he got them. Usually, it’s safe to assume any gift he gives is valuable, and that he did not pay the full asking price. If he paid anything at all.”

A robed man, his face hidden deep in a cowl, shuffled up to the WeavePasha and whispered to him. The WeavePasha listened, but his eyes never left Mattias.

When the aide withdrew, the WeavePasha stood. “Alas, I must leave you to your own devices for now,” he said. “The demands of the city’s citizenry must be met, even when there is the pleasant diversion offered by honored guests to consider.”

He bowed to each of them in turn, and took a deep formal step back from the table. Cephas mimicked the nod and

folding of hands he saw Ariella make out of the corner of his eye.

The WeavePasha yet had words for the travelers, though, at least for two of them. “Northerner,” he said, addressing Mattias, “the prices I demand for my work are always paid in full, even those not measured in coins, and even when the payment is owed by Corvus Nightfeather.” Then he turned to Shan. “And speaking of that worthy one, you, adept, will no doubt discover his whereabouts long before my guardsmen do. Send him to me at once.”

Mattias threw his hand up in a casual wave as the absolute master of the city departed. He pulled another slice of spiced meat from the tray, and for the first time, Cephas noticed there were flies buzzing around the heaps of food.

“Always good to be back in Almraiven,” said Mattias. “Did he tell you how old this place is?”



Ariella’s fellow Akanûlans came to the garden before Corvus returned. Except for the absent ringmaster, Ariella was the only one of the travelers from Argentor free to leave the WeavePasha’s gardens. But she had chosen to spend the night in one of the tents and stayed on after the morning meal.

“They’ll come and find me soon enough,” she’d told Cephas and Tobin, after Mattias and the twins withdrew to their tents. “They can only plot against each other for so long before they realize that plotting requires wits. Much easier to chide me for my many lapses.”

Chief among these, apparently, was that Ariella was not firesouled like the two genasi who were soon after escorted into the gardens. One of the men was barely taller than Corvus, and the other was almost the same height as Cephas, but each was enormously fat, and both had flickering flames dancing from the glowing orange *szuldar*

lines that webbed their ruddy bronze scalps, the fire mimicking hair. They wore fancifully tailored breeches of a dark orange weave, detailed with red gemstones patterned as flames. These were tucked into high, black leather boots that matched the greatcoats spilling down from their rounded shoulders, boots and coats alike also decorated with fiery patterns.

Tobin eyed the men dubiously as they approached. “What is their act?” he asked.

This delighted Ariella, who clapped. “Oh, let’s allow them to demonstrate for themselves, why don’t we?”

The two men strode toward them in a curious, halting gait. After a moment, Cephas realized that they were attempting to walk in lockstep, but the differences in the length of their strides were so great that this was nearly impossible.

“They must have to practice walking like that,” he murmured to himself, but Ariella heard him.

“You have no idea,” she said.

“Ariella Kulmina,” the tall one said, while Cephas happened to be looking at the shorter one. He was speaking simultaneously, more or less, with his taller companion. But they were not speaking in chorus. The shorter man was speaking a different language, one Cephas felt he would recognize if the man would speak louder. “You stretch the bonds of propriety, *again.”* The taller one waited for a moment for his fellow to catch up. “You flout the rules of diplomacy, *again*. You abandon your chambers unannounced, *again.”*

With the repetitions of “you” and “again” and the curious halt-and-go manner the firesouled had of speaking, Cephas was able to hear the shorter one well enough to recognize individual words.

“He’s speaking Alzhedo,” he said. “Like the freedmen. Or almost.” Cephas frowned. “It is something very like it, anyway.”

Both of the firesouled stopped speaking and stared at him, aghast.

“You … what? How dare you suggest—” The short one snapped his chubby lips together briefly on his companion’s outburst, then dutifully took up his simultaneous translation.

“Save the outrage for your letters to your superiors, Lavacre,” Ariella said. “Cephas is not a citizen of Akanûl—or of anywhere else as far as I’ve been able to determine. He has no reason to know about your sect’s linguistic pretences.”

The taller man’s bright eyes darkened. “Flamburnt speaks the sacred language of Fire, earthsouled. You named a human tongue.”

Cephas shrugged. “You’ll perhaps be interested to know that the sacred language of Fire is very like Alzhedo. They could be related.”

Lavacre sputtered again, and Ariella motioned for peace. “The Firestorm Cabal believes that the various languages of the djinn, the efreet, the dao, and so on, are holy tongues given to the genasi as tools to help keep the bloodlines apart and incorruptible,” she said, and this calmed the men more than her placating gesture.

Cephas asked, “So, these languages are not related to the one spoken by humans from Calimport?”

“Oh,” said Ariella, “they certainly are. But try convincing one of these fools of that and you’ve set yourself an impossible task.”

The firesouled spit with outrage. Tobin, who had watched the entire exchange silently until then, spoke. “If it is a clowning tradition, I am sorry to say it is one I do not know. I do not think it a very popular one.”

Ariella frowned. “More popular than one would hope, unfortunately.”

When Lavacre responded, he spoke the supposedly holy language. Cephas understood what he said because the shorter firesouled, Flamburnt, began speaking in the

Common trade tongue, and finally took care to project. The man's voice was unexpectedly high.

"The Firestorm Cabal, windsouled, owes its popularity to the justness of our cause." The short man paused, then spoke on after exchanging a glance with Lavacre. Some shift in their responsibilities had occurred, because now it was the taller man who muttered translations a half syllable behind Flamburnt's pronouncements.

"The Firestorm Cabal stands the long watches, the Firestorm Cabal keeps the history of the genasi as writ and rule, the Cabal assumes the risks in ensuring our future."

The last part of the little man's speech had the sound of a story, and it was clearly something familiar to Lavacre, since the taller man finished his translation before Flamburnt stopped speaking. "We are heroes to the common people, and examples to our youth," the short man finished.

"By which he means," said Ariella, "that these two are even worse troublemakers than most Firestormers, and when our government heard they were claiming their exile was instead some sort of diplomatic mission, my guild was charged with sending someone to balance their lies."

Cephas asked, "So *you* are an ambassador?"

Ariella grinned. "Not a bit. Just a courier and sworn witness who drew the short straw back in the guildhall of the Airsteppers. To be honest, this part of the world is considered a barbaric wasteland by most in my homeland."

To Cephas's surprise, the two firesouled nodded in agreement with Ariella, though they also took her explanation as their cue to switch off speaking roles again.

"The stewards of Akanûl consider us troublemakers because our activities expose their incompetence. Their spies decided our arguments were convincing too many among the young!"

"These two worked the street corner outside the Cabal's Motherhouse in the capital, Airspur," Ariella explained. "People had started avoiding the area. Local merchants

complained, mothers worried about their children passing by, that sort of thing."

"So, to the people in power," Cephas said, "you were … annoyances?"

"Not simply annoyances," Lavacre said. "Threats! To their criminal regime!"

"His Grace the WeavePasha seems to think their presence here is of greater importance than you do, Ariella," Tobin observed.

The way the courier cocked her head to one side reminded Cephas of Corvus. "He does. Finding out why that is the case," she said, "has been the most interesting challenge of this assignment."

She looked at Cephas. "Until recently, anyway."

As soon as it became apparent that Ariella's firesouled countrymen had come to the palace simply to chide her for taking on a mission for the human WeavePasha, she enacted the strategy she assured Cephas was the most effective when faced with Firestormers—she walked away.

"You two should come along," she told Tobin and Cephas. "You two," she said to Flamburnt and Lavacre, "should go … cabal."

As she spoke, Tobin muttered something deep in the back of his throat. Then he joined them in wandering away from the tents and table. His pursed lips soon began to betray him, and not long after, his enormous, infectious grin split his face.

"What is it, Tobin?" Cephas asked, glad to see the goliath smiling.

"I spoke my clan's language back there, when Ariella sent those two men away. It is much like Dwarvish, Corvus says."

Cephas smiled. "What did you say to them?"

Ariella answered, "Come, Cephas, you know what he said. 'You two should go cabal.' "

"Yes!" said Tobin. "Like them with their language for posturing under the language for talking! Although," he

continued, growing serious, “I did not match you exactly, Ariella, because if we have a word for ‘cabal,’ it was never taught to me. I told them they should go enrich the soil of the mushroom beds with bat guano. The word for that sounds very much like cabal.”

Ariella made a choking sound, and Cephas said, “Perhaps they mean much the same thing.”

Tobin shook his head. “It would be a happy coincidence, Cephas, but I am afraid that it is not so. It is a very important task, the fertilizing, for the whole community. What those men do may be very important, but I believe it is important only to them.”

“And to others who share their impoverished notion of what community means,” said Ariella. She peered up at the big man. “You are very wise, Tobin.”

“It is a requirement for clowning.” He nodded, a hint of sadness coloring the words. “Now I must leave you. Mattias asked Cynda and me to meet the people bringing food to Trill. Cynda is to check that they don’t bring too much, and I am to carry the rest.”

“You are kind as well as wise, then,” said Ariella. “Though I suspect Trill would believe you kinder if you let the WeavePasha present her with his whole goat herd. But I’m curious, why doesn’t Mattias go himself?”

Tobin paused. “I think he does not want to risk encountering the WeavePasha again,” he said. “There is old trouble there, I think.”

Ariella nodded in sympathy. “That’s the worst kind. Go in peace, Tobin. Maybe you can properly introduce me to Trill once she’s satisfied her appetite.”

“From what I have seen in my time with the circus,” Cephas said, waving good-bye to Tobin, “that’s the same as saying you don’t want to meet her at all.”

The pair of them followed a graveled path along a brook of deep green water. The current of the stream was curious. It

rushed or lingered according to a force unrelated to the gentle slope it ran down.

Ariella watched him study the water. “I believe it’s a sort of instrument—the sound of the water on the rocks makes a song.”

Cephas shook his head in wonder. “I suppose nothing should surprise me in this place,” he said. “The world really is like a storybook.”

“I don’t know, Cephas. Much of the world is not as magical as these gardens. All of this”—she waved at the profusion of plants, all bearing fruits and flowers in a riot of colors—“the pasha weaves it with his spells. There are too many places where the only things that grow are misery and hopelessness.”

Cephas agreed. “Like Jazeerijah,” he said.

The silver-skinned woman closed her eyes. “I am sorry, Cephas. I am a fool. Of course, you know there are terrible places in the world. You know it better than me.”

Cephas held up his hand, indicating that she should not worry. “No, no, you’re not a fool. It seems a long time ago, now. And misery and … hopelessness?” He looked at her for confirmation that this was the word she had used, and she nodded. “Those are in stories, too, though I’m learning that Azad read only the stories that left no doubts. Or perhaps he changed them in a way that fixed the odds, as on the canvas.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Ariella.

“The canvas,” he said. “You know the arenas? The fights and other games? That’s the kind of slave Azad and the freedmen believed they had made of me. A gladiator.”

“They believed it,” said Ariella. “But you didn’t?”

“I didn’t then,” he said. He felt his broad face wrinkle as the idea troubled him. “But the fix, I was saying. The crowds that come to the Games, they come to see the fighting, but also to lay wagers. Which gladiator will be the first to draw

blood? Will a beast in the bait-frenzy fight or flee? Who will live and who will die? Those sorts of things."

They came to a bench and sat. Ariella took his hand, and Cephas reminded himself that the WeavePasha had done the same thing, a companionable gesture during conversation.

"The stable owner, that was Azad, he makes gold off all the bets, whether his fighters win or lose. The gamemaster, and this was also Azad, makes gold from all the bets, too. But Jazeerijah belonged to Azad alone, and he could also *place* bets. And since he chose the combatants, and he controlled the conditions of the game …"

"Then he could fix the outcome," Ariella said. "He knew how to bet, because he knew in advance who would live and who would die."

"Who would win and who would lose," Cephas gently corrected her. "But it amounted to the same thing, usually."

She gazed at him in a way that made something gather in his chest, not the earth-force but something new, and just as powerful.

"And you always won?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "I always *lived*. But there were times I would not fight. There were matches I could force Azad to call because I found some way to cheat death. I learned early on …" He trailed off, thinking. "I don't remember a time before I knew that Azad would never kill me. He put me in terrible fights, or Shaneerah did, anyway, but he wouldn't kill me. Beat and starve me, yes," he said with a laugh, but she did not laugh along with him.

"So, that's one of the things I knew. I still know it, maybe, one of the only things that doesn't come from stories. I know how to fight and win, and how to fight and lose. I know thirty-one ways to block the swing of a morning star, and I know that when Talid is drunk, he always pulls the whip back early, so you just have to flinch at the right time and he'll think he's struck you. And that Azad the Free will not kill me."

Ariella took his other hand. Cephas thought if what was in his heart had been the earth-force, he could have set the entire city to rumbling. “And you used those things to survive,” she said. “You fixed the game.”

Cephas said, “Not as well as Azad. There were times … There were times when I was the one holding the morning star, and I had to let it fall.”

Ariella squeezed his hands. “Corvus told me this Jazeerijah was an earthmote. That there was no hope of escape.”

To her surprise, Cephas laughed.

“No hope? Corvus is wrong. There was little in the way of *possibility*, but hope? I can tell you of at least six hundred and forty. If hope had wings, some of them might even have worked.”

Ariella gave him a curious smile. “You always talk like an old story.”

Cephas tried again. “I mean that, if I were windsouled, like you, I could have floated down from Jazeerijah. No trick of Azad’s could have kept me from touching the air the way he kept me from touching the earth. Perhaps I could have learned to fly.”

The silvered *szuldar* lines on Ariella’s face flashed. Her deep blue eyes sparked gold, and Cephas realized he was seeing the reflection of his own glowing pattern in her gaze.

“Perhaps,” she said, “you still can.”

CHAPTER TEN

If this room is all you have seen of the world,
how did you measure its width?
—"The Mapmaker's Slave"
The Founding Stories of Calimshan

THIS IS WHAT CORVUS OWED HUMANS. HUMANS INVENTED cities, and cities cast shadows like no other places in the world.

When he stepped through the portal from Argentor, Corvus had noticed that it did not raise the feathers at the back of his neck. The ritual lacked the particular frisson the WeavePasha lent to his magics.

He's left this to one of his vizars, thought Corvus, and he was not displeased by the realization. If Acham el Jhotos had turned his attention to some other of his innumerable plots, then he would not be there to greet them. This meant Corvus would not have to play peacemaker while Mattias and el Jhotos circled each other like a pair of Durpari fighting cocks, a fine thing.

And it meant Corvus would be able to slip out into the city without figuring a way to best the old wizard's personal

warding magics, an even finer thing.

Corvus considered whether or not to tell Mattias he was going out scouting, but he rejected the thought when the ranger scowled at his approach. Corvus understood. The deaths of their companions in the circus meant it would take the old man longer than usual to come back around to their usual choppy state of relations. Faith, trust, loyalty—perhaps even that flavor of love that humans called brotherhood—tied Mattias and Corvus together. None of them made Mattias comfortable simply being around his old friend—not all of the time, and certainly not when others of their friends were dead and Mattias had a more than reasonable notion that Corvus's activities as a spy for hire were partly to blame.

Instead, Corvus told Shan he was going out into the city. As he expected, she expressed a desire to accompany him, and, as usual, he told her no. The halfling sisters could walk unseen from Almraiven to the Sea of Moving Ice, but their gifts were better utilized in wilder settings.

Aside from that, Shan had lately shown an increased *flexibility* in her choices that troubled Mattias with the increased ferocity it lent her. It devastated her sister. Corvus saw no reason to encourage this slow tilt in Shan's moral compass, not yet at any rate. There was no need to further disturb the emotional waters of their already fractious little family.

And it wasn't as if the troupe needed a second assassin.



The WeavePasha, Corvus knew, had taken the first tentative steps in a project the old wizard described as societal husbandry. His intention, laid out in a nested set of plans that had timelines running to centuries, was nothing less than the complete restructuring of Almraivenar society.

The governmental and social structures, the ways of doing business and taking pleasure, the institutions of magic, faith, and slavery that supported the city's way of life, *everything*, the WeavePasha claimed, was anathema to the city he wanted Almraiven to become. Better than most, Corvus knew where the roots of the southern port's ways and mores lay—in the society the Great Djinni Calim led onto the world nearly eight thousand years before. For all the grandiose claims the old Calishite writers made about their ancient civilization—and grandiose claims were the particular specialty of Calishite scholarship—almost nothing about it was the invention of humans.

The Almraiven of the WeavePasha's imagination, though, the shining exemplar of human achievement that was the end of the wizard's grand ambitions, and which, on more than one occasion Corvus had assured him was an absolute impossibility, was an Almraiven free of djinni influence.

The aspect of Almraivenar life that most closely resembled life in the genasi Emirates of the deeper desert, and which was most *unlike* the other greatest human cities, was the simple fact of slavery.

Corvus understood that slaves toiled and died in every city of the Realms, but few of those cities, indeed, were places where the practice was deemed legal, much less acceptable, as was the case in Almraiven. Even rarer were those places that *celebrated* the practice, as was the case in Calimport and its client cities, and in far Memnon and the other places where the efreet and the southern firesouled held sway.

Slavery was an undeniable fact of life in the City of Spells, and should the WeavePasha's plans ever bear fruit, at some distant and unlikely point, it was the fact of life that would have the greatest impact on the city in its changing.

Slaves fed the city and clothed it. Slaves fished its waters and cleaned its streets and, in an aspect that mystified visitors from elsewhere, slaves even guarded the city as the

backbone of its militia. Slaves even filled out the lowest ranks of the city watch.

The WeavePasha made much of the fact that Almraiven, alone of the Skyfire Emirates, was a *human* city. But Corvus believed that for those who lived as slaves, the difference between being in a city ruled by humans and a city ruled by genasi was not that great.

Corvus could not imagine Almraiven without slaves. He thought it likely that the WeavePasha, a man known to have bested a Duke of Hell in single combat, would see his reign ended not because he provoked the ire of enemies without, but because he held a radical opinion that his subjects within would never tolerate.

“Almraiven without slaves,” Corvus mused again, this time whispering. There were none in the fetid alleyway to hear the revolutionary idea. Through the gloom, Corvus could just make out the trench dug at the base of a sagging brick wall that was no doubt older than some gods. A familiar, foul smell floated up from the trench, confirming for the kenku that he had not forgotten the way. Steps were cut into the jumble of old stones that lay beneath the streetscape, remnants of past Almraivens.

A thin line of light appeared below, as a poorly hung door was forced open long enough for a figure to dump a bucket of something mostly liquid at the bottom of the steps.

Corvus put thoughts of the WeavePasha’s mad dreams out of mind. No slaves in Almraiven—who would drink at T’Emma’s?



T’Emma was a gnoll who had managed the minor miracle of growing to adulthood as a runt among those fierce, jackal-headed folk. Corvus had never met a more foul-tempered or sharp-tongued woman. Neither had he ever seen her anywhere but lounging behind the length of a broken ship’s

mast that served as her bar. How the mast was brought to the dugout basement tavern was a minor mystery compared to how such a tavern, owned by a gnoll and serving a clientele of slaves, came into existence in the first place. But exist it did, and it had for thirty years that Corvus could bear witness to.

The gnoll woman did not acknowledge him even after he laid his heavy purse on the stained wood. As usual, she was interested in speaking only to herself.

“There’s that kenku again. He’ll want to know things that are none of his business. He’ll have a lot of coin.”

Corvus said, “I seek word of any agents of the djinn of Calimport in the city.”

“He didn’t even order a drink,” said the taverner. “Every time, he just starts right in like he don’t know he has to order a drink.”

“Yes,” said Corvus. “He always puts it off as long as possible, because he knows that once he orders it, he’ll also be expected to drink it.” He waved a hand at the barrel behind T’Emma.

“Look at that beak,” she said, setting down the cup. “Look at them funny eyes.”

Corvus said, “Look who’s talking,” and threw back the drink.

If anything, the brew was a little better than he remembered. His vision seemed unaffected by the first draft.

“Agents of Calimport,” he said again, “in the city.”

“There he goes. It’s like he gets something caught back in that beak and just has to worry at it and worry at it until it goes down. Or comes back up.”

“And as you said,” Corvus continued, “I have a lot of coin.”

T’Emma bared her fangs, their dingy brown revealing the inadequacies of her diet. She did not intend the gesture to show ferocity. T’Emma revealed her ferocity through her words. “I remember one time I took his gold, then sent him down the wrong alley in Caravan Ward.”

Corvus ran a talon along a wide scar on his shoulder, hidden beneath feathers and leather. “I remember that time, too. It’s how I can tell when rain is coming.”

“That time, he gave out that he meant to rob a man bringing girls down from the Banites in the Ithal Pass. But he was just looking to kill one of the girls.”

Corvus signaled for another drink. “She wasn’t a girl; she was a forty-year-old adept of the Redeemer’s Guild, secreted in the coffles by the Banites and disguised by their rituals to appeal to the tastes of a client of mine. It was his coin you took, by the way.”

“Priests start fighting, the wise go to ground. But there was that big beak, poking in. Lots of priests died around that time. Ugly deaths for ugly men.”

Cephas drank, and the old familiar haze misted up in his peripheral vision. “I didn’t get paid, if it makes you feel any better.”

“Banites stopped running girls down the pass, at least. ’Cause of them Janessar picking up their raids out of the Alimir Mountains.”

This was what had taken Corvus years to puzzle out. The slave population of Almraiven lived under a somewhat lighter yoke than many others. They had enough freedom of movement that they formed communities. They managed to keep familial relations active even when kin were sold apart, and they maintained a culture coherent enough to support a shadow economy—an economy where the coins were struck from information, not the Weave Pasha’s gold.

The chief exports were rumors, the principal trading partners were the Janessar abolitionists who attacked the slave trade all over the South, and the high minister of trade was a runt of a gnoll woman who never left a dugout dockside tavern.

T’Emma was the principal agent of the Janessar within Almraiven. He realized this when he noticed that her self-directed growls only aided his activities when the deaths of

slavers were involved, or, usually coincidentally, the possibility of escape for slaves. She was an invaluable source of information, when it served her cause.

Or could be made to believe it would.

“These agents seek a man under my protection. A man I’ve brought to the WeavePasha.”

The taverner’s laugh sent Corvus back to terrifying night runs across the plains of his youth, the desperate efforts to avoid hunting packs unleashed by his teachers. When her barking changed to a cough and the cough yielded a yellow bolus spit on the bar, T’Emma said, “Oh, listen at him talk. Fine friends in high places he’s got.”

Corvus turned his cup upside down over the woman’s spittle. He slid his purse next to it. “The WeavePasha believes this man to be the son of Marod el Arhapan.”

“That’s an evil mouth. Naming such names in the company of a lady.”

“He wishes to shape this man into a blade, and set it against the throat of the master of games.”

“Thinks a person is something to be honed and used up and thrown away.” There was a shift in the gnoll’s timbre, and Corvus realized with a start that, for once, T’Emma really *was* talking only to herself. “That’s what they all think.”

Corvus tapped his claw on the bar next to the leather pouch. “If there are agents of Calimport in the city, they will learn of this man and warn their master. They will kill him, and the Games will go on.”

“Listen to him. Like he thinks the Games would cease with a splash of el Arhapan blood. Like he knows who any masters are.”

Corvus wondered if he should try another tack. Usually, she would have sent him on his way by this point, whether she offered hindrance or aid. She reached out with her grizzled paw and swept the pouch beneath the bar.

“He probably thinks those firesouled Akanûlans serve only one master. As if *he* ever did.”

Corvus knew better than to thank her. He left without another word.



Corvus hurried across the city, cursing himself for having discounted Ariella’s mention of members of the Firestorm Cabal in Almraiven as unimportant.

These firesouled—efreeti-kin, some called them—must have some unlikely connection with the djinn-dominated Emirate of Calimport. The genasi of the South were almost universally declared for either Air *or* Fire, carrying on a war begun on another world so long ago that the immortals who waged it had forgotten its origins. Calim and Memnon, founders of the cities that still bore their names, blasted the lands they found on Faerûn down to rubble, then blasted the rubble down to sand.

Only the so-called high magic of the elves put a temporary halt to the devastating war. The elves imprisoned the djinni and efreeti nobles in a pretty crystal and told themselves it would last forever—this, in a world where even the gods didn’t believe in eternity.

Above, according to the priests, the gods donned new masks or traded old ones, reshuffling their pecking order like understudies in a mummers troupe on a night when the star takes ill. Below, according to the historians, the common folk of the Realms did the only thing they could, the only thing they ever did. They dealt with the consequences as best as they were able.

One consequence came in the deep desert of Calimshan, in a place called the Teshyllal Wastes: the breaking of a crystal. Whether the Spellplague was the means of that shattering or it simply presented the opportunity for some unknown force, Calim and Memnon made the only use of

their newfound freedom their alien minds could imagine. As they had seven thousand years before—and as some believed they *always* had—they made war.

Corvus read once that in the final years of the last human caliphate of Calimport, the city's population approached two million people. The historian could only estimate, of course, because the Calimien kept slaves, but they did not count them.

Corvus had never visited Calimport, but neither was he the only spy in the South. The governments of the Sword Coast generally agreed that the current population of the windsouled-held city was around sixty thousand.

In the scant decades of the renewed conflict, of the Second Era of Skyfire, or Calim's Second Rule, or Memnon's Blessed Return, or whatever name was used, well over twenty-five times that number perished in one city alone. Calimport had been the largest city the natural world had ever seen. Now, it must be the most haunted.

Corvus considered all this as he made his way back to the WeavePasha's palace. Allies of the Memnonar, the faction that counted that unimaginable loss of life as a victory, were now spying on behalf of Calimport's rulers?

The kenku clicked his tongue. Well, that was it, wasn't it? These northern genasi from Akanûl considered their cousins in the Emirates to be barbarians. The Akanûlans kept no slaves and divided the rulership of the nation, even though their people, like the genasi of Calimport, were mostly windsouled. Indeed, many Akanûlans were mutable, shifting from manifestation to manifestation, something considered abhorrent by the bloodline-obsessed followers of Calim and Memnon.

Thinking of T'Emma's last words, he could only guess that the motivations of these cabalists must be as tangled as his own.



The blue light fell on Corvus when he was forty paces from the WeavePasha's palace. Its walls loomed above the surrounding rooftops, blocking the stars in the eastern sky.

The stars in the western sky were blocked by the blue glow of a djinni's endless whirlwind.

Corvus drew his short sword, even knowing it was useless against the floating giant who descended upon him.

"Shahrokh," Corvus said, "the WeavePasha's wards will already have sounded. Best flee before he boils you down to nothing." Corvus backed against the alley wall and wondered if he dare draw his shield from the portal concealed in his breast feathers.

The djinni vizar, managing an expression combining imperiousness and boredom, rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. Pain blossomed in Corvus's head, as if an ice pick had been driven through one eye. He wretched and fell to his knees.

"The human's … *competence* … is known. As are his motivations. To face me out here in his beloved city would be to bring it down around him, even if he managed to destroy me in the process. But do not worry, spy. If alarms are ringing within el Jhotos's cursed palace, they warn him of nothing more than a sending. Only my semblance is polluted by this human-fouled air. My essence soars above Calimport."

"What do you want?" gasped Corvus.

The djinni lord laughed. "As I have told you before, you are incapable of understanding the answer to that question. What you wish to know is why I am here, why I suffer your presence, even remotely."

The invisible spike withdrew from Corvus's eye, but an all-too-visible threat replaced it. Corvus had not realized he had dropped his sword until it floated up from the ground.

"It amuses me to offer a warning. You and your companions present an unexpected level of … martial

efficacy. The standing membership of El Pajabbar has been completely wiped out just once before in its history, and Memnon the Hunter himself took the field that day. The remaining yikaria in Calimport are on the edge of open rebellion, and may have to be put down.

"Circumstances have changed. Should the WeavePasha enspell the pasha of games's heir and send him as an assassin, the *heir* will be put down. Return Marod yn Marod to us untampered with."

Corvus found that he could not move. The sword's point traced the fine lines of the guild symbol carved into his beak, its presence invisible to most and its meaning unknowable to even the few who might detect it. How is he doing this? the kenku wondered.

"I will try," said Corvus, "but that is all I can do. I have no influence over the WeavePasha."

With a gesture, the djinni sent the short sword plunging deep into the flesh of Corvus's thigh. Still held immobile, the kenku could not even fall.

"You risk your life to speak, and then choose an obvious lie? Your influence on el Jhotos is known."

The weakness he felt spreading throughout his lower body could not be attributed to any special quality of the blade beyond its sharpness. Corvus coated his weapons only with poisons he was immune to. The djinni must have opened a vein.

"I will try," said Corvus again. "This is all I can promise."

"Corvus Nightfeather works best when he is offered unusual incentives," said Shahrokh. "This is known. Return the heir. Meet your other, more pressing obligation to me. Do this and earn a favor you will count a blessing. When the pasha of games sends the goliath and the halfling woman into the arena, I will ensure they do not face each other."

Shahrokh's disappearance was instantaneous and absolute. Without the blue glow, the alley was pitch dark.

But I can see in the dark, thought Corvus, not realizing it was an interior blackness washing over him. Why can’t I see in the dark?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The pasha who would be numbered among the elect demands the loyalty of the strong, and holds it only for himself. Likewise, it is only to himself that the pasha tenders loyalty.
—Erlo Elraedan
The Blood-Drenched Throne
Printed and Bound at Calimport
The Year of Ocean's Wrath (1212 DR)

CEPHAS SAT, LEGS CROSSED, AT THE CENTER OF A GLADE of towering trees. The closely trimmed lawn he rested on was on the opposite side of the great circular garden from the cluster of tents.

Ariella faced him, her legs also crossed. Their knees had to touch because, she said, they must be close enough to join hands. Before they found this secluded spot, she returned to her tent and changed into the same loose-fitting clothes Cephas wore, though she still had her sword. The weapon lay to one side, its tooled scabbard and belt draped over the satchels holding Cephas's piecemeal armor and double flail.

She told him to sit quietly and seek a place of peace within himself that matched the peace without. He looked around, and said, “I have not seen trees like these before, though there were only a few different kinds on the highland plains in Tethyr. There were none at all in the canyon, or on the Spires of Mir.”

Ariella angled her head up at the rugged bark and silver-backed brown leaves in the canopy high overhead. “They’re weirwoods, I think, though I’ve never seen one, either. Said to be rare. But perhaps one of the spires we saw in Argentor was once of a kind with these, before they all changed to stone. Do you find talking about trees brings you to a peaceful state, Cephas?”

He grinned. “I don’t think I’ve ever talked about trees at all. Unless Grinta the Pike’s advice on the killing of treants counts, though her technique is not peaceful.”

When Ariella laughed, he remembered that her voice had reminded him of bells the first time he heard it—bells on a weapon harness. Perhaps I don’t know what an inner place of peace is, he thought.

“You told me you knew thirty-one ways to block a morning star,” she said. “My own fighting style is less formalized than the ways you were taught, I think. But I wonder if any of those ways is a block of the *returning* swing. Did you ever fall before a blow, then strike while you opponent was extended, so you needed to defend only against the weaker backhand strike?”

Cephas answered, “The Fluttering Leaf style. I’m no master of it, but I know it. It is better suited for …” He stumbled, not wanting to offend her. “For more delicate fighters than I.”

She arched an eyebrow. “By which you mean weaker. I am not as strong as you, Cephas Earthsouled, but strength does not win every battle.”

Cephas pictured bullheaded axemen and spinning silver blades. “I know. I’ve seen Shan and Cynda fight,” he said.

“Just so. Though I would not look to them to learn peace of mind. The Fluttering Leaf, now, when a practitioner of that art accepts the opening strike, what does he do?”

A thousand days of drills came to mind. “Well, nothing. The blow falls, and you fall before it. You hold no stance; you raise no warding shield. It passes over you.”

“You need to take every thought that comes to you and fall before it. Anything that rises up, let it pass by. Even the energy you call the earth-force. Let that flow away. To achieve a Second Soul, a windsoul, you must empty the one you already possess.”

Cephas tried. The first thing he realized was that trying to think of nothing yielded the opposite of the desired effect. A floodgate of memories, worries, idle thoughts, and unfocused observations was opened by his effort. Her voice sounded like bells.

“I grow more peaceful inside when you’re talking, Ariella.”

She smiled. “I will tell you, then,” she said, “that I myself express no other soul than the wind. I have never felt a need to listen for anything other than its call.”

Cephas said, “But you think you can teach me this trick?”

“It is not a trick, Cephas. It’s a *discipline*, like your gladiatorial fighting styles or my sword spells. I can show you how to open yourself to the wind, because I have heard the wind in you.”

Cephas found that other thoughts ceased to press on him.

“Those genasi who take on more than one soul are one of the great proofs that we are all one people, despite the differences in our abilities and appearances,” she said.

“There are others? Other ‘great proofs,’ I mean?”

Ariella said, “The Firestorm Cabal actually makes one positive contribution. They have kept genealogical records that span centuries and track lineages across different worlds. They don’t publicize this, but their cabal was founded here, in the South. The genasi who first drew swords in the Second Era of Skyfire were Firestormers. They

brought their records north and joined them with the annals of my people, and found that the clans and families are related in deep time. Their work is related to the third great proof."

"What is that?" Cephas asked.

Surprising him, she blushed. Her silver cheeks turned the same blue iron shade that colored her crystal hair. "Genasi, no matter which soul they express"—she cleared her throat—"breed true."

Cephas found he was at the edge of his experience. "Oh."

She laughed. "The Cabalists believe the great clans of earthsouled and stormsouled and all the others should keep their lineages apart. They use words such as 'pure' and 'inviolate.' When couples of different expressions, well, have children together, for instance, the Firestormers say they've blurred the *szuldar."*

Cephas asked, "This is widely believed?"

She shrugged. "It's hard to say. There are many who find the idea repellant, this programmatic separation of the expressions. I know I do. And my parents. My father is watersouled, and my mother most often expresses as fire."

"Yet you are windsouled?"

Again came the laughter like bells. "My mother was born windsouled but found the fire suited her better. She is a famous chef in our city. My father has always been watersouled, as has one of my brothers. He followed Father into the Waveriders, the Akanûlan navy."

"I didn't know you had a brother," said Cephas.

"I have two. The Waverider is the eldest. My younger brother is windsouled, and says he will join the Airsteppers' Guild like me. I think he'll change his mind once he learns it's something more than an adult version of the races he and his friends run among the skymotes."

"The motes of Airspur host better games than Jazeerijah, then," Cephas said.

She looked at him. “It’s when you talk about that place that I hear the wind in you the loudest.”

Cephas despaired of finding the peace of mind she described. “How did your mother learn the firesoul?” he asked. “You said she was not born with that expression.”

Ariella blushed again, even deeper this time. “Mother’s story …” she said, hesitating. In the short time Cephas had known Ariella, he had never seen her hesitate. “It has to do with a man she knew before my father. She says it involved ‘certain fiery circumstances.’ ”

Cephas pursed his lips. He did not quite know why that caused Ariella to blush and hesitate, but it gave him an idea.

“Well,” he said, gazing up at the trees, “perhaps what we need is something related to the powers the windsoul grants. If I learn to fly, we could seek ‘certain heightened circumstances.’ Though I don’t know what those could be.”

He felt her hand on his chest and thought of lightning.

“I know something we could try,” she said.



A time passed that was as endless as the span of a heartbeat.



After, he felt weightless. Ariella was in his arms, her limbs wrapped around him. She was no burden, though. She did not bear him down, but up.

Eventually, he opened his eyes and dared to look at her. After the first giddy moments when they untangled each other from their clothes, she had filled up every sense. But still, he suspected that he would never see enough of her, never hear her enough, never feel her strong arms clasped behind his neck enough.

She was watching him with a smile on her face that was gentle and mischievous both. He twined his fingers in hers

and drew her hand to his lips. The silver tones of their skin matched perfectly. Silver tones?

He looked at her again. She raised her eyebrows, then glanced down. “Maybe we should put our clothes on and go introduce you to the others.”

He started to ask what she meant, but his voice failed him when he saw their clothes strewn across the glade, far below where they hung, clinging to each other while slowly rotating in midair.

She kissed him. “Welcome,” she said, “Cephas Windsouled.”



The WeavePasha’s scrying room had no doors and no windows, and he could count on the ringed fingers of one hand the number of people aware of the chamber’s location: himself, a regrettably deceased apprentice, and the eldest of his grandchildren, the powerful sorceress who served as his chief vizar.

So he was confident that he was alone and unobserved as he took a cross-legged seat in midair before one of the room’s many untidy workbenches. He swept aside various instruments of minor magic, but he took more care in setting aside a tray of crystal fragments, the clay handle and spout of an inert lamp, and numerous scrolls half covered in his own spidery handwriting. Finally, he found his favored scrying device, a mundane brass-backed mirror of questionable taste and little monetary value.

He could use this mirror—he *had* used it—to spy out the secrets of the most powerful beings in Faerûn. Now he breathed magic onto the scratched silver surface of the mirror and whispered syllables of power. “Where are you, Corvus?” he asked.

“Right here, Your Grace,” said the kenku from behind him.

The WeavePasha did not turn around. Instead, he found a pen, dipped it in a pool of gelid ink spreading from an overturned pot, and made a note to himself on the closest scroll. *Self, dead apprentice, granddaughter, and kenku*, he wrote. Aloud, he said, “Do you know, Corvus, that I believe you’re a sort of lodestone for hubris in the mighty? Where intemperate pride is at its greatest, well, there you are. Or rather, here you are.”

“An interesting theory, WeavePasha, but I have never been to Waterdeep.”

There was an unusual strained tone in the kenku’s mellifluous voice, and the WeavePasha turned, asking, “How about Calimport?”

He saw that Corvus bled freely down one leg, leaning on the grim-faced halfling adept, Shan. The spymaster said, “No need, Your Grace. Calimport has come to me.”



Cynda gave the kitchener’s apprentice a disapproving look and swung a sloshing pail back up onto the cart, using one knee to buck the heavy container over the sideboard.

“Please, mistress,” the disheartened boy said. “That is very valuable wine, a vintage of your own kin in the Purple Hills. The cost of what you spilled there would pay my wages for a year.”

Tobin reassured the apprentice. “It would have *all* been gone if we took it to Trill, now wouldn’t it? The WeavePasha is too generous. This brace of sheep is more than enough, and more like the simple fare she is used to. Though we are grateful for it all, to be sure.”

The boy still looked doubtful. “The mutton is no simple fare, sir. The spices and herbs the chef used in their preparation are very fine. Their flavors guided my choice of wine. Are you sure the dragon would not like just two or three of these casks?”

Cynda gave him a firm shake of her head. She spelled out a word in the sisters' fingertalk.

"Nonthal?" said Tobin aloud. "That is a town—"

"In Turmish, yes!" the apprentice said. "They have a wonderful varietal of ruby that would go very nicely with the mutton. Is that the problem? I have plenty of it laid in."

But Tobin recalled why Cynda had thought of the town. "Young fellow," he said, "I am sure you are right about the wines. But you are wrong about Trill. She is a wyvern, not a dragon. And should you ever find yourself in Nonthal, there are many there who can explain why wyverns should never be given wine."

With that, Cynda completed her culling of Trill's midday meal and indicated that Tobin should shoulder the pair of dressed and roasted whole sheep.

Tobin could never have found his way back to the straw-filled fountain where Mattias waited with the impatient Trill, but Cynda did not hesitate as they walked the branching paths of the artificial woodland. He told this to Cynda, and she smiled, acknowledging his compliment, but also tapped her ears and pointed to his.

Tobin said, "Well, yes, I suppose that I would not have been lost forever. She does make quite a racket when she's waiting for her food, doesn't she? And, of course, if I took too long, she would have come to find me."

A voice said, "You'll not be easily found where you're going, goliath." Another voice sounded at the same time, muttering words beneath the first.

Tobin was counted fast among goliaths, but Cynda was counted fast among the swiftest fighters of the South. By the time he dropped the sheep and brought up his huge fists, she had launched four silvered darts and leaped into a tumbling charge after them.

The darts struck a transparent barrier, which flashed red long enough for Tobin to see its domed shape and realize that he and Cynda were trapped. Cynda stopped her

headlong spring just short of the invisible wall, crouching low, next to where her darts lay in the gravel. A smell of sulfur filled the air, paired with a thin line of smoke trailing from the spot where the four darts had struck.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” said the firesouled Akanûlan Flamburnt, who stood beside his fellow Firestormer. “There must be something unusual about those darts. No matter, they did not get through.” He paused and glared up at Lavacre, who stared at the wisp of smoke and absently rubbed his throat. When Flamburnt struck him in the side, he remembered himself and hastily muttered in the language of fire.

Cynda ignored both men. She took up a handful of gravel and tossed one stone at a time against the barrier, working her way around Tobin. She held her short sword drawn in one hand.

“Testing the strength of my spell, halfling?” Flamburnt asked. “Finding the limits of your cell? Don’t worry, you won’t be in there much longer.”

Tobin asked, “What are you doing, Flamburnt? We are guests of the same host. We have not raised our hands against you.”

Cynda suddenly leaped back against Tobin’s legs, holding her sword before her. She kicked up more gravel, and Tobin saw that it now fell much closer to them than it had just a moment before. Already, Cynda’s darts lay outside the shrinking barrier.

“It looks as though the magic Shahrokh gifted me will not last long, clown,” said Flamburnt. “If your friends are wise, they will forget you. But since you have all bound yourself to Ariella, then they are all certainly fools. They will seek to rescue you. This, as the djinn say, is known.

“And since there is the barest possibility that you will see the windsouled bitch again before you die, I bid you tell her this. We may be among the lowest ranked at the Motherhouse of the Firestorm Cabal in Akanûl. But we are

ranked among the highest at the Sacred Hunter's Lodge in Memnon."

Tobin began to reply but found he could not draw breath to speak. There was no more air in the shrinking dome, as the interior whirled with black and red waves of fiery magic. He crouched, bent over Cynda, and pulled her close.

And then he knew no more.



The WeavePasha used tongs to pull out the filthy rags the kenku had stuffed into the wound on his thigh, laying them in a tray to one side. The tray had held a collection of glowing rings a moment before, but the wizard had casually spilled them onto the floor when he cleared the table where Corvus lay.

The old man sniffed. "Is that … *orvas*? Gods above, Corvus, you have to stop reading old books. I have forbidden even the ingredients of this vile concoction from the city, so I know it came from your blade, not this trash you used for bandages."

Corvus hissed in pain when the WeavePasha plucked a bloodstained feather from his leg. "It affects only mammals, Your Grace," he said. "The more common blade oils are less finely formulated. And I would lie here poisoned by my own sword but for my old books and their secrets."

The WeavePasha took a clay vial from a rack, removed its cork stopper, and peered at the contents. A doubtful expression crossed his features before he shrugged and turned the vial upside down over Corvus's leg. Yellow steam boiled from the wound, and Corvus would have fallen from the table as he convulsed had Shan not rushed to hold him.

"Whatever poison was borne in the mud and garbage of the alley has sickened you well enough. That tincture will boil it out of your blood, though."

Corvus snapped his beak open and closed several times. “The choice was between possible infection and certain blood loss. I judged that Shan would find her way over the wall in time to deal with the first, but not the second. And as I was blinded by the djinni’s spells, I could not see what I was using to staunch the flow.”

The WeavePasha frowned. “Yes, that’s the most troubling aspect of this business. He spoke the truth about only being present by semblance. If a magician of his power had appeared in Almraiven, I would not have been the only one to sense it. As I should have sensed his spellwork this close to the palace. The djinni is digging deep in his stores of knowledge and making use of ancient items of power. He has to be. The question is why. If they’ve discovered my plans for Cephas, there was no need for such a display.”

Shan passed her dancing fingers before Corvus’s eyes. “Your Grace,” he said, “Shan asks about the vizar’s threat concerning a goliath and a halfling.”

The WeavePasha waved dismissively. “I would know if any dislocative sorceries were attempted against my defenses. Be at ease, adept. My wards are not so easily defeated coming in as you found them to be going out.”

If Shan was embarrassed by the WeavePasha’s chiding, she did not show it in her expression, which remained worried despite his assurances.

Corvus sat up on the table, steadied himself, then hopped down to the stone floor. He bent his right leg a bit farther than his left on landing, but there was no other sign of his recent wound. “Still, perhaps it would be best if we check on our friends. It seems that we will be in Almraiven longer than we had intended, now that you must abandon your plans for Cephas.”

The WeavePasha narrowed his eyes. “I have no such intention. The windsouled woman has just now finished the task I chose her for, and through a means I had not anticipated.” He smiled. “Remarkable woman.”

“I wondered what her role was in your game,” said Corvus. “But even so, Shahrokh is aware of the gambit. It makes no difference that Cephas has gained a Second Soul that will see him welcomed by his father. You cannot hide a death spell in him, because the djinn know it will be there.”

Shan stood very quietly, watching each man in turn.

“The djinn will look for it,” the WeavePasha said. “They will not find it, and their pride will allow them to announce the return of Marod yn Marod and parade him before the windsouled nobility of Calimport. The plan—which *you* devised, I will remind you—remains sound. I will enact the ritual tonight.”

Corvus shook his head. “You know I bow to no one in my respect for you and your abilities. But I fear that it is you who are blinded by pride, not the djinn. Your powers are legend, but as you yourself said, Shahrokh is expending enormous magical capital. What if they detect your sorceries inside Cephas?”

The WeavePasha waved aside the protest. “That was always an acceptable risk.”

Corvus eyed the wizard up and down. “You remain true to yourself, old friend,” he said eventually. “My first judgment of you stands. You will do *anything* for this city.”

The old man looked sharply at the assassin. “And my first judgment of you stands. You are here, and alive. The genasi is below, expressing his mother’s shameful secret no more, and alive. These things are true, Corvus, because *you* will do anything at *all*.”



“Enough,” whispered Mattias.

Trill understood his tone better than his words, as always. She ceased the prattling and complaining she’d voiced as they ambled along the path. She stretched her neck out long and low, balancing it with the lashing spike of her tail.

She held her wings close, unlike a wyvern in the wild when faced with fight or flight. Mattias was on the ground, and she would take no action without first seeing him safe on her back.

The ranger saw the silver glint from three hundred paces away. Alone, he would have made a cautious approach, secreting himself in the trees and stealing closer, silent as a ghost. Trill's presence precluded stealth, though it presented other advantages.

One hundred paces away, Trill's nostrils flared and she fluttered her vestigial lips. "Yes," he said. "Fire magic, but coupled with air. Anything is possible here, girl, but el Jhotos usually confines such experimental dabbling to his workrooms."

Fifty paces from the reflection, Mattias saw what the afternoon sunlight sparkled on. Trill sensed his alarm and surged forward, the keen of a clutching wyvern separated from her fledglings rising in her throat.

"Wait!" he told her. "Stand watch. I must glean what I can from the ground here before we hunt."

Trill answered with a quizzical chirp.

"Oh, yes," he said, already calculating how long it would take him to find the others. Already he was wondering if he had seen the last of Corvus Nightfeather, or if the kenku would be at his side when he shook the dust of these gardens from his boots.

"Oh, yes," he assured her. "We will hunt."



In a way, the WeavePasha was glad to learn he could still be surprised. Whatever signal passed between the kenku and the halfling, he saw no sign of it. He only saw the woman raise her hands, and his first thought was that the control the Arvoreeni adepts were said to hold over their own bodies must be even greater than was rumored,

because while no magic flared in the chamber, her closed fists sprouted a forest of silver talons.

Ah, darts, of course, he thought, as she flicked her wrists. Missiles flew in every direction. The woman even had the temerity to launch one at *him*, though he sent that one flying wide with a thought. Many of the others, however, found targets.

She had to have chosen at random. He himself did not know the contents of all the bottles and jars on the cluttered workroom tables, and had cataloged only the smallest fraction of the artifacts brought to him from around the world. And as mirrors crashed and vials exploded, his concern was not great. A conflagration born of the untidy release of many disparate magics was a heartbeat away, but there were contingencies for such mixed into the mortar of the room's walls, and his personal protections could stand against a god.

The woman was not intent on testing those. She drew a short sword that came near to dazzling the WeavePasha's magic-sensitive vision, matched the draw with a parrying blade in her left hand, and leaped—not at him, but at Corvus.

The kenku's unreadable black eyes, the WeavePasha found, had not shifted their gaze from his own when the halfling launched her insane attack. The only movement the assassin made was a light cock of his head, as if puzzling over something. Then he was lost in the shadows that swirled around him, and the charging woman became lost in them as well, as they both faded from view.

A vast explosion wracked the chamber. The WeavePasha felt the warp of reality buckle, and he cursed. He would have to take a moment to see that the mystic energies boiling around him did not entice some otherworldly threat to descend on the city, which bought the kenku a little time.

Summoning his power, the WeavePasha wondered at the kenku's luck in managing this distraction. Then he chuckled,

remembering that Corvus Nightfeather never relied on luck.

“Contingencies, indeed,” he said, and went to his weaving.



As they made their way back to the tents, Cephas imagined that nothing would ever make him let go of Ariella’s hand, even though the clasp of their intertwined fingers was light. As it turned out, all it took was the strike of a wyvern, diving at speed from on high.

Trill closed her great claws around the windsouled pair, barely slowing before she beat on, gaining altitude and wheeling toward the fountain, which Cephas could see below. The impact of Trill’s gathering them up had knocked the breath from his lungs, but as soon as he could speak, he said, “Are you all right?”

Ariella nodded, dazed by the sudden, unexpected flight.

In his new body, Cephas was still heavily muscled, but not as broad of shoulder and hip as when he was earthsouled. He learned this when they dressed in the glade, and Ariella laughed at his baggy shirt and how he held his trousers up with a gather of cloth in one fist. Cephas made short work of adjusting the straps of the patchwork scale armor in his satchels, and was glad he wore it since Trill took less care with her grip of him than she did with Ariella. In fact, the wyvern seemed troubled by him.

They lurched to one side as Trill performed a wingover roll and ducked her snakelike neck down and in so that her enormous face studied Cephas briefly before she had to straighten to maintain their flight. In that instant, her tongue darted out and its tip struck Cephas full in the face, as solid as a blow from a quarterstaff. His head snapped back.

“Ah!” he cried, and would have brought his hands up to wipe the wyvern’s stinging spittle from his face, except his arms were pinned by her grip. “Why did she do that?”

“She’s confused by your new appearance!” called Ariella. “You are you but not you, so she had to check!”

“I hope none of the others use the same technique!” he said as Trill dropped them a few arm spans above the courtyard. Matching Ariella, Cephas found the wind in himself and floated down to the ground.

Their smiles died when they saw Mattias, coolly holding an arrow nocked and ready, his canes twisted into their form of a curving greatbow. The old ranger narrowed his eyes on seeing Cephas, but other than that, his only reaction was to say, “Of course. The elite of Calimport are windsouled, so Corvus and el Jhotos must have a windsouled.”

Before anything else could be said, a swirl of shadows twisted out of nowhere by the fountain, and Shan came rolling out. Like Mattias, she was fully armed and armored, blades bared like her teeth, casting about for an enemy. When she did not recognize Cephas, she charged, rejecting the twin’s usual flourished rolls and spins in favor of a full-on sprint, blades extended.

“No!” The cry came from two directions, Ariella at his side drawing her sword and Corvus behind Shan, holding out one hand.

“Shan, it’s me!” Cephas said. “It’s Cephas.” His tone was gentle, which sounded odd to his own ears. Ariella had told him that the changes in his body and abilities would be mirrored by changes in his mood and feelings.

Shan skidded to a stop, forgot his presence, and ran for the tent she shared with her sister the previous night. She stopped when Mattias called after her.

“She’s gone, Shan. So is Tobin.”

The kenku gestured for Cephas, Ariella, and Shan to approach. When they all stood together, he said, “I was attacked by a djinni skylord of Calimport. I know him to be the vizar to the pasha of games there, the man the WeavePasha believes is Cephas’s father. The djinni

threatened to capture a halfling and a goliath from among my companions."

"He's done so," said Mattias. "The firesouled Cabalists were his agents. They used magic far beyond what they should be able to wield, some combination of fire and air I have never seen. Cynda fought, but she and Tobin were taken. Where, I cannot say. The firesouled left by sorcery. El Jhotos had to have known they brought powerful items with them onto these grounds, Corvus."

The kenku shook his head. "I don't think so. Or if he did, I think their nature was disguised. Appearances deceive, functions change." He looked at Cephas, taking in his silver skin and the short strings of crystal that served as hair where he was smooth-pated before.

"But it makes no difference," he added. "The WeavePasha is no longer our ally and seeks to prevent us from mounting a rescue. Cephas, I have placed your life in danger, and I will offer explanations and apologies soon. For now, we have only enough time to attempt escape, and you must accept that as amends."

Cephas did not know what to make of this swift change of circumstances, but something inside him welcomed it. He looked to Ariella, who gave him a curt nod.

"I can get out of the city on my own," Corvus said. "Old man, can you and Trill win past whatever the WeavePasha sends against you?"

Mattias did not hesitate. "Yes. Shan can ride behind me. And Trill can carry Cephas and Ariella, at least for a time. That is, if the lady is accompanying us."

"Even if I did not have other reasons," Ariella said, "it is my duty to track down Lavacre and Flamburnt. If they acted at the direction of a Calimien djinni, as you say, then they acted for the enemies of my queen and stewards. The swordmages of Akanûl are trained to deal with traitors."

A long blast sounded from a brass horn atop one of the minarets of the palace. A hum rose in the air, and the tiny

crystals in Cephas's hair caught a vibration that churned his stomach.

"The WeavePasha comes!" said Corvus. "Mattias! The petrified delta of the Quag!" Shadows boiled around the kenku.

"He will know we flee in that direction!" shouted Mattias.

Corvus said, "But he dare not follow there," and disappeared.

Mattias cursed and signaled Trill to lower her head. "But of course *we* dare go there. Shan! Where are you?"

The halfling came running from Ariella's tent, a bundle strapped to her back.

Cephas kept a wary eye on Trill's launch and approach after Shan leaped up behind Mattias, aiming to have some influence over where her claws closed around him this time. "I guess Shan thinks you'll want your armor!" he called to Ariella as they were caught up again.

"I'm beginning to wonder if I should ever take it off around you!" she shouted, and then, despite the circumstances, when she saw his crestfallen expression, she laughed.



Many hours later, bells rang three times in the WeavePasha's darkened inner chamber, indicating that his high vizar sought permission to enter.

He waved a hand and the woman, eldest of his grandchildren, materialized before him. She looked exhausted, and her boots and cloak were coated with dust. Before she spoke, he pointed at the decanter and crystal goblets on a nearby rosewood table. The vizar's thanks were in her sigh, and she trudged across the room to pour a glass.

After she drained the wine in a single draft, she wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "Mattias Farseer," she said, "is a devil. And Corvus Nightfeather does not exist. At least,

my mages can find no trace of him on this or any other plane of existence.”

The WeavePasha chuckled. “Mattias is a human man. One of tremendous talents and extraordinary dedication, perhaps, but I have begun to wonder if it isn’t unshakable fidelity that defines humanity. Or at least its heroes.”

The woman across from him had heard the WeavePasha say such things every day of her life, and she was approaching her one hundredth winter. “Your dedication to the city is unshakable, Grandfather,” she said. “His dedication is to a wild animal and a handful of criminals. It is you who are the hero.”

The WeavePasha heard the note of fanaticism in her voice and sighed, knowing he’d planted it there. He trusted she would grow out of it. They always did—all but him.

“Did he kill anyone?” he asked, and stood, deciding that he, too, wanted a drink.

“The ranger? No.” She hesitated. “Though in truth, he could have.” A different note came into her voice, and the WeavePasha refilled her glass before pouring a half measure of ruby wine into his own. “In truth, Grandfather,” she said, “he could have killed *me*. The charms you sent with us dampened the enchantments of the bow, at least temporarily, but even after it was nothing but a length of heartwood casting mundane arrows … The *reach* of the thing. The *speed* he shot with. And he was prepared for the disenchantment. When the aetheric string failed, he pulled a length of gut from his beard—his beard!—and was shooting again instantly. That is a mighty bow you made, Grandfather.”

The WeavePasha inclined his head. “And yet,” he said, “when my magics were drained from it and its wielder faced the mightiest of my descendants, he still escaped.”

His granddaughter took a seat on a footstool, her shoulders slumping. “Yes. He and the halfling that rode behind him on the wyvern’s back. The genasi she carried

dropped away in the scrubland along the coast, perhaps half a day's ride west by horseback. I have sent out a company of the city guard, but …"

"But they will find nothing," he said, gently finishing her sentence. "Because the windsouled will enter the Plain of Stone Spiders long before our horsemen arrive, and our commanders know they are forbidden to enter those lands."

"Not that they would, anyway," said his granddaughter. "Not that anyone sane would."

"So you believe there will be deaths after all, eh?" he asked.

The woman shifted uncomfortably. "If they are fools enough to cross the old course of the River Quag, yes. But, my lord …"

"Ah," he said. "We come to Corvus."

"There were no deaths among those of us who flew in pursuit of the wyvern." She saw his darkening features and rushed on. "And none of those who sought the kenku were harmed, either. But the summoners among them believed their spectral hounds had his scent near the docks and called up a chain of runespiral demons."

"Within the city walls?" he demanded, anger in his voice. "The kin I set to guard *against* such things unleash them in my city?"

"In a district of empty warehouses, WeavePasha, in the Street of Stolen Stones. They judged the risk acceptable, and they never lost their grip on the leashes. The demons all converged on the same ruin, and … they all died, Grandfather. Six of them."

The WeavePasha considered another glass of wine but decided against it. "A creditable effort," he said dryly, "for a man you believe not to exist."

She spread her hands. "I offer no apologies with these explanations, Grandfather. My daughter stands ready to relieve me as your high vizar."

“Your *daughter*?” he asked. “You think I don’t feel old enough already?” He waved her closer and embraced her. “You performed well under circumstances I would have found challenging myself. The kenku threw the dice well-knowing what faces they would show when their tumbling stopped. He threw them on a table he believes I will not play at.”

“You believe them all to be gathering on the plain,” said the vizar. “You would go out and face them there yourself? I know you will send no others to that place.”

The WeavePasha sighed. “No, Granddaughter. I will not leave the city, as the kenku anticipated. Probably not ever again, unless the fleet your uncles build finds its ways to the waters we have dreamed of. No, Corvus Nightfeather has escaped, and he has taken a tool with him we might have used to keep the djinn occupied and away from our walls for quite some time. It might even have destroyed a few of the haughty bastards.”

The woman thought about this. “Grandfather,” she asked, “is this a tool that can be used against us? If your assassin takes the el Arhapan heir to Calimport, will he not one day be the leader of our enemies? From what you told me of the boy, he is far more formidable than his father.”

The WeavePasha nodded. “He is. And the djinn might even allow him freer rein in ruling his own people than they give that fool Marod. But I have spoken to Cephas, and while I do not know his fate, I sense that is a man who will always seek the righteous path. At least when he can see it.”

The vizar frowned. “And yet the possibility remains. He embodies a potential threat, either as a tool of the djinn or as someone who would dare to judge you unrighteous.”

“Enough!” cried the WeavePasha. “Are the threats to Almraiven we are sure of so inconsequential that you feel free to pursue one that exists at the far end of a causal chain even I can’t track?”

“Respect, Pasha,” she said. “We guard against many ‘potential’ threats.”

The WeavePasha pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. “Potential is something you can measure. What you’re talking about is paranoia, which can expand beyond all reason and which I will suffer in none of my kin.”

The woman stiffened, then bowed. “As you say, WeavePasha.”

The old man sighed again. He had not slept in so long. “They seek to cross the Plain of Stone Spiders, Granddaughter, a journey only armies and elementals have survived in more than ninety years. Measure that potentiality, and be at ease. I go to seek some myself, in my bedchamber, if one of you hasn’t turned it into an alchemy laboratory since the last time I saw it.”

His vizar smiled. “It remains as you left it, Grandfather. Do you remember the way?”

He raised his hand, waving her back to her seat. “Stay. Finish that bottle. It’s a new vintage from the Turmish vineyards called Wyvern’s Tears. It has to all be drunk once it’s opened or the acidity becomes unbearable.”



After he left her alone in his inner chamber, the WeavePasha’s granddaughter sat for a long time, drinking and thinking, weighing potentialities and trying to remember if her grandfather had ever before been bested in the seat of his power. She thought about her father, missing for decades since an attempt to infiltrate the City of Brass, the extra-planar capital of the hated efreet. She thought of her fierce daughter, and of her myopic son, and of her one hundred cousins, and of all the other humans in this last human city of a land once home to millions of humans—this city she was literally bound to protect.

“I am sorry, Grandfather,” she whispered. “The potential has weight.”

Her nephews and their leashed demons came to mind. There were some leashes her family had held for a very long time, indeed.



The demon leaned against its bonds, pouring all of its terrible strength into the effort of breaking them. Black rivulets of sorcery spilled from its many eyes, their fetid ducts the source of a never-ending flow of power that splashed on the rotting stone. The demon lifted several of its enormous spiked feet, finding new positions in the slurry of waste magic and crumbled rock that formed the floor of its temple prison.

Otherwise, it did not move. It *leaned*. With its bloated nightmare body, yes, but also with its maelstrom of dark magic and its blasphemously ancient will.

And its hate.

The hate is what *kept* it leaning. The hate is what drove it to forever test this boundary, what fed the rituals of its bizarre worshipers on the plain above the temple, what had kept it pouring unimaginable strength and power against its leash, from this immobile position, for one hundred and twenty-two years.

“Spider That Waits.”

At first, the demon thought it was more chattering from the warped creatures that attended it. The spiderfolk were still more or less mortal, and mortal languages all sounded alike to it.

An image appeared in the demon’s consciousness. It was the visage of a human woman, calmly studying it. She held a twist of leather in her hand, and when it saw that, the demon howled.

“Qysara!” it hissed. “Perhaps the shame I felt when you first banished me was misplaced if you have survived until now.”

The woman shook her head, and the demon noticed something. A quiver along the jawline, was it? Or an imperfect shade in the spectrum of the shields guarding her sanity? It was a weakness, whatever it was—something to sniff out; something to exploit.

“Qysara Shoon the Fifth is dead, Zanessu, and has been these twelve hundred years. I am her descendant and namesake, Munaa yr Oma. It is I who hold your leash now.”

The demon giggled, a sound like slow bubbles bursting through some hellish marsh. “The leash was *lost,”* it said. “I *returned* after the thousand years of exile your ancestor laid on me.”

“Yes!” said the human. “And you spun your webs again for a time. But my grandfather spent decades rebuilding our family armories, hiding behind secret names and acting from the shadows, as our family was forced to for much of the time you rotted in the Abyss, fiend. Then, when the gods walked the earth …”

“When the personifications of hubris you mortals call gods fell to Earth a century ago, a man came with the leash and imprisoned me here. I remember. El Jhotos …” The demon cast a dweomer of black bile at the woman’s will, but it was seared away to nothing before it could fall.

“And now,” it continued, as if it had not tried to annihilate the woman’s soul, “Here you are. Plotting against your liege? Seeking power from a source he does not control? In search of allies?”

Enormous, unending waves of pain wracked the demon. It collapsed in a heap, its legs curling over the filthy sac of its body while it screamed. When the pain faded, the demon sought the woman’s visage again. It saw that it had made a mistake. If there was weakness in this mortal before, it was gone now.

“Ridiculous fiend,” she said. “You are incapable of understanding the love and loyalty I hold for the one you call el Jhotos. You think to tempt me with offers of power? You are *nothing* compared to him. You are a dog on a leash, and not even the dog you claim to be. Zanessu? Demon prince? Drow god? You are a jumped-up ascendant, immortal only because you were born of the venomous spittle fallen from a real power’s fangs. I could end you with a thought and a turn of my hand. You *know* this.”

The demon felt a vibration in the leash that invisibly bound its necrotic soul. It felt something boiling up in the mix besides its endless hate.

Fear.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Spider That Waits has eight thousand eyes,
The Spider That Waits sees through Janna's disguise,
The Spider That Waits spins a web out of lies,
Janna gets caught there, and there Janna dies.
—Calishite Children's Song Collected at Volothamp
The Year of the Blazing Brand (1334 DR)

CEPHAS SQUINTED AGAINST THE SUN, THEN RETURNED TO his study of the boulder-strewn gully wall, plotting a route before he began the climb. Ariella squatted at the top of the rise, drinking a single mouthful of water from their last canteen and keeping a westward watch. Cephas had watched her make the ascent, but he had stopped trying to follow the leaps and graceful slides she made from shifting stone to invisible handhold. The couriers of the Airsteppers' Guild had trained the swordmage to navigate across broken country as if she were dancing.

Cephas was no dancer.

"Any sign?" he asked her, keeping his voice low even though they had yet to see another living thing since they

entered this unnatural plain.

Ariella did not answer aloud. She shook her head and held up the canteen, giving him an inquiring look. Cephas considered for a moment, then nodded, and she tossed it down. He took as shallow a swallow as he could manage, and again wondered whether this journey would be easier if he were manifesting the earthsoul he had known all his life.

At least I believe it's the one I've known all my life, he thought.

Corvus's hurried hints of explanations to come weighed on him. The joy he felt on learning another way of being faded with the knowledge that the people who rescued him from the mote apparently had intended to make some unknown use of him.

He tried again to hear the song of the earth, but heard nothing except the wind.

Ariella told him not to worry. He was new to his Second Soul, and it was still coming fully into its first manifestation. "Besides," she said, "the earth's song is probably muted here, or warped. I know the wind is strange just from blowing over this strange ground. Don't you hear it?"

He did. The wind he heard with his ears was little different than the wind that blew through the canyons of the Omlarandins, but when he listened with his windsoul, he heard something different, a high and lonesome sound, almost as if the air itself felt pain.

"Yes," Ariella said when he told her this. "Yes, that's it exactly. High and lonesome." She shivered, then bounded off again in one of her masterful displays of movement.

Cephas tucked the canteen through the webbing of his belt. He did not see an easy route up through the tumble of rock and dust, or even a difficult one. Well, he thought, I cannot hear the earth, but I can still hear the wind. He felt the wind-force gathered inside him. Yes, enough time had passed since he last released it.

Cephas spread his arms wide, brought his feet together, and straightened his spine. With a thought, he rose from the ground, floated up the gully wall, and came down to a silent landing beside Ariella. She returned his grin. “You don’t have to do it so prettily, you know,” she said. “It is even possible to slouch in flight.”

He addressed her gravely. “That is not the way of a strongman,” he said, and even to his own ears, his voice was a fair imitation of Tobin’s.

Ariella laughed. “Listen to you!” she said. “Imitations, flying every chance you can, and even taking a drink of water when you are thirsty instead of grimly soldiering on. I knew I heard wind in you as well as rock.”

Cephas smiled but did not answer. He was glad she was pleased by the behaviors that surprised him, but he hoped that listening to the wind was not the same thing as being irresponsible.

But then, Ariella was a swordmage, and so a scholar of both spell and blade. She was a member of a guild that demanded a rigorous ethical stance and an extraordinary physical discipline, and she was risking her life to pursue traitors to her homeland. If he sensed any irresponsibility in himself, it was not because it blew in on the wind.

There *was* something on the wind, though. A rushing noise that advanced, then retreated. The wind brought a scent, too, familiar, but not quite identifiable.

“Do you hear that?” he asked Ariella. “What is it?”

She listened, and then an enormous, excited smile lit up her face. “That, Cephas,” she said, “is the sea! Come on!”

She took his hand, and now he had no problem following her.



It was … enormous. Gigantic. Unending.

“What do you think?” Ariella asked him, standing next to him on the bluff as they looked out over the water.

Cephas cleared his throat. “Big,” he said, before he could gather his thoughts.

She did not laugh. “It is that,” she said. “It is big.”

The surf crashed on the rocks below. Black-winged birds with scarlet head feathers screamed and dived, dipping into the water and then arcing back up with silver fish twisting in their beaks.

“Is that what your father hears?” Cephas asked. “And your brother? Is that endless rush the voice of water?”

“Hmmm. One new soul is enough for you to consider right now, I think,” she said archly. Cephas smiled, content to watch the water and breathe the salt air instead of trying to fathom their call.

He saw a triangular shape on the waves, moving east to west. He began to ask Ariella what it was, before realizing he already knew.

“A dhow!” he said, pointing. “A fisherman’s dhow as in the stories! Do you suppose he’s had to fight off a sea dragon?”

Ariella said, “The Almraivenar fishermen don’t come this far west, but I don’t think it’s because they fear dragons.” She laughed. “You still think every new thing you see is out of a tale of wonder. I like that.”

The shadow of enormous wings crossed over them, and a hunting cry drowned out the waves and scattered the terrified birds. A huge serpentine shape beat hard for the little boat, which was tacking to shore.

A figure stood in the prow, waving. It was Corvus, and the winged shadow was Trill, diving to carry him to land.



Shan found them not long after and led them to the camp Mattias had set in the lee of a gigantic oblong boulder balanced atop a much smaller spire.

“It’s probably been that way for a century or more,” said Mattias. “At least since the swampland petrified into what we see now.”

What they saw, away from the shoreline, was the same terrain Cephas and Ariella had traversed for the better part of two days before their little band gathered back together. Cephas had come to think he knew what the word “plain” meant in the journey across the highlands of Tethyr. But if this brooding wasteland was also a plain, then his understanding of the word was as limited as his understanding of what “ocean” meant before Ariella led him to the seashore.

Corvus crouched over a smokeless fire, the fuel for which consisted of dried bricks he fished from the mysterious portal in his breast. “Not too many of these stored away, I’m afraid,” he said. “But we’ll not need a fire once we get to the Calim Desert.”

Cephas wondered if his mental image of a desert was anything like what they would find beyond the western horizon. “Because it is endlessly hot,” he hazarded, “and there is nothing to burn across the distance a camel can walk in a hundred days?”

Mattias snorted. “Do you even know what a camel looks like?”

Cephas sensed Ariella’s eyes on him. “It’s like an ox for the desert,” he said.

Mattias looked at him, holding a grin, then at Ariella. Whatever he saw on her face caused him to clear his throat and rearrange his features. “Well, yes, more or less,” he said. “Good lad.” He went back to checking the gear they had managed to carry out of Almraiven, supplemented by items Corvus periodically remembered he had tucked away in his ritual-bound storage place.

Corvus looked up. “We’ll not need a fire, Cephas, because we will be met by your kin.”

Shan moved next to the kenku. Dark circles had appeared under the woman's eyes over the last two days. She had a haunted look, and Mattias said she had not slept since Cynda and Tobin disappeared. She looked a question at Corvus, not troubling herself with gestures or signs.

"And we *will* surrender ourselves to them," he said, addressing her directly. "It is the fastest way to Calimport, and the surest way of finding our friends. They will treat us as prisoners at first, but when Cephas's father learns he is in the city, we will all be taken to the arenas." He stirred the fire with the tip of his short sword.

Unexpectedly, it was Ariella who spoke next.

"Past time to come clean, Ringmaster," she said. "I believe I have divined what part I played in this game you've been up to with the WeavePasha." She squeezed Cephas's shoulder. "And I have no regrets, since I would have done nothing differently if I had met Cephas when he wasn't chained in your coffle. But I don't like being manipulated, or used. And I have been used less harshly than some."

Corvus paused for a long moment before he began to speak.

"You've heard stories about the uprisings, Cephas. They've occurred in Calimshan for, well, essentially forever. There are countless instances in stories and songs, and in historical documents and other sources, as Ariella told us not long ago."

Cephas thought back to that conversation. It seemed a long time ago to him.

"It is an unchanging feature of Calishite life. Slaves do not wish to be slaves. And they try to escape. They flee into the desert or take their chances on the sea. They flee into death, some of them. Too many of them.

"There are whole nations founded by people like Azad and his freedmen, did you know that? Tethyr is one, though I doubt their queen would take kindly to the comparison. And there are people all over the South who make it their life's

work to win freedom for enslaved peoples. Knightly orders and religious brotherhoods, secret societies, and even simple bandits when it suits their purpose."

Cephas shook his head. "Why are you telling me all this? You mean to say you and the circus are some of these people? I'm to believe you're a knight of some kind?"

Corvus said, "No, Cephas. I am not a knight. I am a spy. And I freed you because it suited my purpose."

Mattias Farseer took a deep, deep breath, but did not speak.

Cephas tensed, growing angry. "What is your purpose, Corvus?"

Corvus made the ticking noise at the back of his throat. "A question for another day, perhaps."

"That's a day that's been a long time coming," said Mattias.

"That man you all talk about, Azad," said Ariella. "He led an uprising in Calimport?"

"Azad the Free is not a man to lead an uprising," said Corvus. "He simply led an escape. Before that, I have learned that for a ten-year period in the middle of this century, from the time the great djinni and efreeti nobles Calim and Memnon disappeared until twenty years ago, a human slave named Azad stalked the arenas of Calimport and Manshaka as no other gladiator in history has. He used a double-headed flail, he won over a thousand matches, and he ended his career when he was taken into the household of his owner, Marod el Arhapan."

"The man the WeavePasha says is my father," said Cephas.

"Oh, he is your father, Cephas," said Corvus. "At least, it is his blood that runs through your veins, and that suffices as a definition of fatherhood for many. The records I consulted in Saradush, and earlier, in Airspur, suggest it. Then Elder Lin confirmed it when she examined your *szuldar* lines. You are a

scion of the el Arhapan line, one of the oldest windsouled lineages on the planet."

"Then Cephas's mother was earthsouled," said Ariella. "An unlikely match from what I have heard of the ruling classes of Calimport."

"An impossible match, yes," said Corvus. "And now we come to the key that turns the lock of our friend's past. Who was the mother of Cephas Earthsouled?"

Cephas asked, "The pasha of games has no wife?"

"By all accounts, Marod el Arhapan is a remarkably focused man. His passion is the arenas his family rebuilt after the departure of Calim. He has enormous political power, but rarely uses it unless he is made to by his vizar, the djinni Shahrokh. Otherwise, he is content to be the master of games. The only times he leaves his floating palace or the arenas are when he travels to the training camps he maintains in the deep desert. He is known to have married just one woman and to have fathered just one child. They both disappeared from Calimien society decades ago."

"When Azad led his freedmen north?" asked Cephas. "Bringing me with them? What of this gamemaster's wife?"

"His wife—your mother, Cephas—died in the Year of the Malachite Shadows, twenty years ago. Not long after giving birth to an earthsouled boy."

"Which the el Arhapans could not countenance," Mattias interjected. "Why did they allow Marod to marry an earthsouled woman in the first place?"

Cephas, not Corvus, answered. "Because they did not know," he said. "She wore a Second Soul."

Corvus nodded. "Marod could not have known."

"Why did she keep it a secret?" asked Ariella. "She had to have known the child might reveal her."

"The answer to the first question is rooted in Southern genasi society. Even before the return of the djinni lords, the el Arhapan windsouled were involved with the earliest incarnations of the Firestorm Cabal. In the South, the sect is

even more radicalized than in Akanûl. They preach division of the various souls, yes, but with the renewal of the war between Memnon and Calimport, the different chapter houses proposed ranks. The genasi *must* be divided by their forms, because one form is naturally superior to the others. Which form is held supreme depends on where a given chapter house was located. In Memnon and Teshburl, they teach that the firesouled are foremost. In Manshaka and Calimport—”

“The windsouled,” said Cephas, studying the backs of his silver hands. “That is two. What of storm and water? What of the earth?”

“As with anything else in the Emirates, the interference of the Plane Below compels. Air and fire hold sway because the djinni followers of Calim and the efreeti followers of Memnon hold enormous power over the genasi and any others living in the Skyfire lands. Of all the aspects of the genasi, earthsouled are ranked the lowest. At least, that is what the ruling windsouled and firesouled say. It’s one of the few things they agree on.”

“Are we slaves there?” asked Cephas.

“Yes, some earthsouled live as slaves. This is what Elder Lin believes to be your mother’s story. The matrilineal *szuldar* she traced on you belong to an obscure family of earthsouled who have been held in slavery in Calimport for generations. They are not even recorded by the Firestormers in Akanûl, or by the High Heralds. Marod el Arhapan married a woman who did not escape slavery into the desert or onto the sea, then,” said Corvus. “She found a Second Soul, and sought escape through it.”

Cephas stared at the kenku. “What was my mother’s name?”

“I do not know. Not really. As the pasha’s wife, she was known as Valandra el Arhapan, without reference to her own family name. That’s not unusual when the windsouled nobility marry someone from a low-ranking family, and she

would have used a false name in any case. The Argentori have abandoned the naming conventions of the Emirates, but Lin said the most common name among earthsouled of your lineage is el Shelsper."

"Valandra el Shelsper," said Cephas. "Marod el Arhapan. Do you know, I never spent any time at all imagining my parents? My daydreams were all versions of the stories in Azad's book, with me taking the hero's part. But if there are any stories in that book about parents and children, he never read them."

"I know a little more, yet," said Corvus, quietly. "I know the end of your mother's story."

They all watched the fire, though there was little light in it. Even its heat was faltering since Corvus had ceased to tend it.

Cephas said, "Tell it."

Corvus said, "A tenday after you were born, Valandra el Arhapan's name was struck from the genealogies of every Cabal chapter house. And, though I did not connect them at first, the name Valandra inh Yikaria was entered into another set of records."

" 'Inh'?" asked Ariella. "I do not know that article. 'El' is of the family and 'yi' is of the place. 'Adh' is the slave of."

"It is rarely used," said Corvus. "And when it is, it is considered an insult. It means 'sister of.' "

"Valandra, the sister of Yikaria?" asked Cephas. The word was so familiar …

" 'Sister of *the* Yikaria,' I believe," said Corvus. "As to who they are, you know them. Or have seen them. You fought them. It is the name El Pajabbar use for their own people."

"What?" asked Cephas. "My mother's name was listed with those of minotaurs?"

"No, Cephas," Corvus replied. "She was listed with slaves bound for the arenas."

"Oh, Cephas," said Ariella.

“The day after you were born, your mother was turned into the pits below the Djen Arena. She was issued a pail and a cotton shift, and her face was branded with the Calimien slave mark. She survived there for ten days, until her name appeared on the card of gladiators and threw the wagering into disarray, because she was unknown and had drawn a famous opponent.

“She was handed a spear and driven onto the sand, and, before eighteen thousand spectators, she met the greatest gladiator of the era, and she died, Cephas. She died as the last opponent faced by Azad adh Arhapan.”



The prey moved about less than they had earlier, but the vibrations of their steps and sighs and endless prattle still carried along the stone strands. All the scouts felt it, and joined their minds together, then their minds with stone. They agreed. The prey was *stuck*, their position was *fixed*, and the fighters would come from the north.

Web and rock, thought the scouts, web and rock.

The demon sent its awareness through the stone strands, obliterating the personalities of all the plaguechanged aranea joined with it. The demon ignored the chaos this engendered in the ranks of his worshipers. The barely discernible individual personalities of the spiderfolk did not concern it, as long as their fighting prowess was unaffected.

The demon moved south over the plain, testing the limits of its leash. It had briefly imagined it was testing the limits of its freedom, but as soon as the concept came to its mind, the torment returned. The human woman was watching closely.

The demon did not consider the possibility of escape. It could not be said to be wise, but the demon *was* canny, and it knew any such attempt would find its physical body destroyed and its wretched soul sent spinning into the

blackest pit in the universe. It had crawled out of that pit once already, and would not risk being cast down into it again.

The sorceress would never free it. She would not even reward it, as the demon doubted she possessed the depravity of imagination necessary to conceive something it would find rewarding. Except that she held the leash, the woman was a poor stand-in for the wizard who imprisoned it in the temple more than a century past. She was not even a pale shadow of the Qysars she claimed as ancestors.

The demon realized the woman might sense this direction in its thoughts, so shied away from them, fearing her psychic lash. But the lash did not fall.

A message coalesced out of the vibrations in the stoneweb. The shamans were joined in their awareness. They were the caste of aranea who believed the demon to be a god, and who had reshaped their warped and forgotten people when the land around them desiccated from nightmarish swamp to chthonic badland. The shamans pooled their thoughts from points scattered widely across the plain, where their naked bodies stretched across the ground, attuned to the tiniest trembles in the earth. They collectively decided on an action, then communicated their will to the vast, immobile eggmothers, who plucked the stoneweb and directed the hunters and scouts and fighters.

The demon felt a warning tug on its leash and turned its attention back to the wailing shamans.

The prey was stuck in the far southern reaches of the web, they told it. The scouts have fixed the particular junction of strands, and the fighters approach. Do they wait for its majestic and terrible coming?

The demon listened, waiting to see if the sorceress would offer direction. Nothing came, and it judged the distance to its prey to be such that it could drag its enormous body there in a moment or two—no farther than a human could walk in a day, certainly.

Send in the fighters, the demon told the shamans. The one that survived receiving the message passed it on.



A bolt of liquid stone shot out of the dark, enveloping Cephas's head and shoulders and making it impossible for him to breathe. He dimly heard shouts and the rasp of steel clearing leather, then the screams of a wyvern intent on destruction.

A tremendous blow fell, shattering the net covering his face. He blinked rock from his eyes and looked up to see Mattias standing astride him, one of his canes held in both hands like a club.

"Keep your head down," said the ranger. "We don't know what they are, but these webs they cast are hard to clear off."

He twisted his canes together, and the thin gold line of the bowstring shone in the dark. "Surprised the bastard didn't have them disable it permanently," Mattias muttered, then said, "Ariella was on watch at our right flank, beyond the balanced rock."

Before they bedded down, after Corvus promised to explain the WeavePasha's plot at first light, Cephas had made a long, careful check of his equipment. He turned the double flail over and over, wondering about its age and powers. About its *provenance*, and about the great value it held for Azad the Free. Corvus saw him and said, "I have no way of knowing, Cephas. He used a flail on the sands. Whether it was this one in particular …"

The kenku had not finished the thought, and now that Cephas heard the sounds of fighting out on the plain, he found that it did not matter. For now—for tonight, at least—the flail was just a tool he would use to help Ariella.

Mattias's climbing of the rock was a hard thing to watch, but for all his awkwardness, the ranger made the top of the

balanced tor quickly. The strength in his arms must be enormous, thought Cephas, as he trotted around the stone. As he went, he shouted over his shoulder. “Where are the others?”

A flaming arrow flew away from the rock. An explosion followed out in the dark, and inhuman screams of pain rose up.

“You will see Corvus and Shan only if you’re in trouble!” Mattias called. “Trill is on the wing. She’s in a testy mood.”

So am I, Cephas realized. It felt good to have implacable anger surging through him, energizing him. Did I become earthsouled again while I slept? he wondered.

But no, it was the wind-force gathering, and the heft of the double flail was different in his hands—not lighter, precisely, but suited for a more fluid style of sweeps and swings than the inexorable crushing blows he usually favored. He was going to fight differently, he sensed, but he was still going to fight.

An alien figure rose up from a cluster of boulders on his left, hefting a crude, stone-tipped spear and chattering from the mandibles that dominated the lower half of its face. Their attackers were like nothing out of a story, and like nothing from Grinta the Pike’s lengthy catalog of past and potential victims.

Cephas flexed his left arm, dropping the distal flailhead and bringing the proximal around high and hard. The spiked steel sphere struck the creature in the face, rupturing one of its enormous faceted eyes. It fell without casting its spear, the eerie chattering dying with the thing that sounded it.

“Another one!” Ariella shouted. “Behind you!”

Even as he turned, her glowing blue sword whipped out of her hand and swung in a wide arc around him, leaving a trailing wake of golden sparks that floated to the ground, guarding the two windsouled in a circle lit by magic. The blade cut through the spear arm of one of the creatures, but another ducked back, only to stop still and sink to the

ground with white bile pouring from its mouth. Cephas caught the briefest hint of shadowy movement behind the thing and knew Corvus was near.

Very near, in fact. When Cephas turned to face Ariella, the kenku stood between them.

“Imaginative namers of places, Calishites,” Corvus said. “Plain of Stone Spiders, indeed.” A rushing wind above their heads caused them to instinctively duck, and when they straightened, the motionless silhouettes of three more of the spiderfolk plummeted to the ground, killed and dropped by Trill.

No other threats were apparent nearby, though the steady song of Mattias’s bow did not diminish. Every note his weapon sounded was followed by an answering scream or percussive shock.

“Shan saw another group of them circling around to the south and went to meet them,” said Corvus.

“This seems an ill-considered attack,” said Cephas. “Unless it is a probe of our strength.”

Corvus cursed, and Ariella looked grim.

“Of course,” said the kenku. “Something else is coming.”

Cephas nodded sharply. “Then we should gather together and guard against it,” he said. He turned toward the camp. “Perhaps where Mattias stands and shoots.”

Corvus said, “If it is where Mattias chose to stand, then it is the strongest place on the field.”

“Ariella can carry you up,” said Cephas. “I will find Shan.”

“I have my own means of getting there,” Corvus said. The last word floated out of the shadows, and Cephas had no doubt the kenku stood beside Mattias in an instant.

“He said she was to the south,” Cephas said to Ariella. “Come on!”

Weapons at the ready, the pair of windsouled ran, curving wide of the camp in case more spiderfolk were drawn there. When they came to a wash or a sinkhole, they took to the air, and it was when they were floating down from such a

leap that they found a clutch of dead spiderfolk, five or six in all.

Shan stepped out of the dark, breathing hard, her arms coated to the elbow in gore. She did not greet them, but stepped past them to the fallen creatures. She bent and retrieved dart after silvered dart from the corpses.

“Shan,” said Ariella, “we’re to join Mattias above the camp. Corvus fears—”

The halfling woman held up one hand, cutting the swordmage short. She brought her fingers to her lips, signaling silence. She looked north, and it was then that Cephas and Ariella heard the sound—heard and *felt* it.

Tremendous crashes sounded, growing louder, above something else, a sound almost like the sea in its liquid swell and fall, but thicker, contained.

“It’s like a giant dragging a wineskin over gravel,” Ariella said.

Cephas said, “If the giant has many legs.”

“Come, Shan!” said Ariella, and the halfling leaped onto the swordmage’s back. The windsouled pair ran for a moment, and then they flew.



At the direction of Mattias, even Trill came down from her hunt, awkwardly wrapping her long body around the rock so that the companions watched the thing that approached over a parapet of scale and muscle.

“I don’t understand,” said Cephas. “I see it, yet I cannot say what it is I see.”

“Foul magic,” said Ariella. “It is a nexus of fear and hate.” She rubbed her hand across her upper lip, the scant light making the blood flowing from her nose appear black against her silver skin.

The thing dwarfed the rock where they stood. Cephas wondered if it might even be as large as Jazeerijah. The

milky white sac it dragged behind its countless grasping legs had something of the shape of the earthmote. The massive, distended body was bulbous near its front, then tapered to a spiked protuberance that left a trail of slime stretching over the northern horizon, glowing with heat or sorcery.

The impossible creature was still beyond the farthest range of even Mattias's bow, but for all that its movements were a kinetic chaos, with the bulk of its body dragging over uneven ground and its tree-trunk legs clattering and pulling a half-dozen different directions, it approached with the speed of a galloping horse.

"It is a demon," said Corvus. "An abomination of the Abyss and a stain on the fabric of the world. Oh, Acham el Jhotos, I never dreamed you would go so far."

"Hmmm," said Mattias, and he said it with such calm, that the others dragged their gazes from the nightmare on the plain to look at him. "Do you know, Corvus, that now that it's come right down to it, I think you're slandering the old tyrant? I doubt it's his hand that guides that thing. Ah. It hardly matters."

Corvus said, "But perhaps it does. If I can reach the WeavePasha, he might—"

"Swordmage," said Mattias, interrupting Corvus's rush of words. "What does your magic tell you? Can you send your thoughts as far as the edge of this rock? Can you even feel your own power within that thing's aura?"

"No, Mattias," she said.

"Of course you can't," he answered. "I can't even tell what time of night it is, and I'm about as sensitive as a turnip. Corvus, you're a hobbyist with a very impressive collection of toys built by your betters. But the only tools you have right now are your shadows and your blade. And against that thing, they'll avail you as well as … well, as turnips."

"So we stand here and die?" Cephas asked. Trill constricted her body, struggling to wrap them in her coiled

torso and sheltering wings.

“Not at all,” said Mattias. “The plan is unchanged. Corvus will finally tell the whole truth about something. The djinn of Calimport will find you in the desert and sneer elaborately. Shan”—he turned, crouched, and looked the woman directly in the eye—“Shan will find Cynda, and the blood of those who hold her will make a warning sign, a ward that keeps the wise away so that they will sing of Shan’s descending on them for a hundred years.”

The old man winked at Cephas. “Didn’t know I liked stories, too, did you?”

Corvus stopped him. “What is this? What are you saying?”

Mattias pulled a quiver from his back and drew the first of its score of arrows. He stuck its point down in a crack that ran by his feet, then set another there, and another. He set out more and more of the black-fletched shafts as he spoke.

“I am doing what I’ve always intended, Corvus,” he said. “I am offering up my own secret at last. I am telling you why I have stayed by your side, through blood and darkness, tempering what I could and mourning what I could not. Telling you why I’ve made this journey of—gods, has it been forty years?”

Corvus waved his hand impatiently. “Shan,” he said, “climb down to the camp and gather all the food and water you can carry. Ariella, you remember the way to the coast? Go ahead, scout a route around any spiderfolk who still live. The dhow I piloted must have washed ashore on the tide, and with luck—”

“With all the luck in the world, with the goddess Tymora flying down to kiss your lipless mouth, we would make it the length of a drunkard’s song,” said Mattias. Anger flooded his voice. “Corvus Nightfeather! Death and doom approach, and they will not be stayed by your schemes! Our enemies have unbarred the gates of hell and set a hunter against us who will never pause, except for blood!

“But you can save these people. You can save yourself. I *will* do what I have always intended.”

“What are you talking about, Mattias?” asked the kenku. “What are you going to do?”

Cephas heard notes in Corvus’s voice he never imagined he would. He heard pain. He heard bewilderment, and grief.

“Ah, there it is, finally,” said Mattias, and he must have been talking about the demon, because he plucked an arrow from the ground, drew it to his cheek, and released. A tremendous explosion sounded in the night.

He turned, one last time, to Corvus.

“I am going to ensure your escape.”



Trill did not protest.

This shocked Cephas as much as anything else. Mattias paused in his shooting just long enough to put his hand on the wyvern’s head and say, “Take our friends as far as you can, girl, then flee north. Find others of your kind in the mountains. Stay far from the settlements of men and elves. You are free.”

The wyvern relaxed her grip on the balanced tor and fell away. The sound of her wings rose up from below, then was lost in another devastating release of magic from one of the ranger’s arrows. At the last instant, Shan leaped after Trill, darting past Mattias so that her shoulder brushed against his blurring hand. When the wyvern wheeled around with open claws, the halfling’s face was visible between her wings, white against the boiling clouds of black on the plain behind them.

Cephas and Ariella did not get to say good-bye before they were swept up.

“The kenku!” called Ariella.

Cephas looked down. The spider demon seemed to grow ever larger even as they retreated, but Mattias and Corvus

were small figures on the distant rock. Corvus was leaning close to the ranger, as if he were saying something. Shadows rose and Trill dipped in her flight.

“He is above now, with Shan,” Cephas said.

The sounds of the ranger’s arrows were a long time in the fading, and were still discernible when Trill dived and deposited the four companions on the western bank of another petrified river. She did not pause after the halfling and the kenku slid from her saddle, even though Cephas approached with the intent of cutting her harness clear. The wyvern leaped back into the air, dipped her wing in something that might have been parting, and flew away, back to the east.

“She is ignoring Mattias’s wishes,” said Cephas. “She is going back to fight with him.”

Corvus shouldered his pack and started walking away from the river. “She is going back to die with him.”

Shan scrambled after Corvus, but Ariella and Cephas stood for a moment, torn between listening to the sounds of battle behind them and trekking after the kenku.

“Is that what he told you on the rock?” Cephas called.

“No more words passed between us than what you heard,” Corvus replied. “Now come on. These are the banks of the old Volomir River, still short of the desert. But we can be there by dawn.”

Another blast, the loudest yet, sounded behind them. Cephas imagined he heard Trill’s battle cry in it.

They walked through the dark, the way clear beneath bright stars. For a long time, none of them spoke.

When Corvus broke the silence, it was clear to the others that they should not respond.

“Well, he was a fool, of course,” said the kenku. “He spent his whole life making the wrong decision every time he was presented with a choice.

“He might have been a scholar, if you can imagine that. For all that he was raised among woodsfolk who valued

tracking more highly than reading, he had a sharp mind and his family valued it, at least enough to send him to schools in the Silver Marches towns during the winters. He always went back when the thaws came, though. Always back to the forests.

“So, he decided to become another anonymous ranger. The North is full of them. But it turned out—and I suppose this is something that might have proven valuable if he had actually followed through—it turned out that Mattias Farseer was destined to be the greatest archer the world has ever seen.

“You think you have seen him shoot? In Berdusk, they sing a song about the flight of a single arrow he loosed when he was nineteen years old.

“But he was a fool, as I said, and chose a lesser path.

“These northland rangers, you see, in the main they train as swordsmen or archers, but some among them set those ways aside in favor of the companionship of animals, can you believe it? Even Mattias wasn’t fool enough to hold such an intention, but, that shot out of legend? The one from the song? He felled a striking wyvern from a thousand paces away. The beast was feeding off a village’s sheep herd and they hired him to save their spring lambs.

“He took less gold than he deserved and headed home. On the way, he heard a cry in the forest. There was a nest, and a single fledgling wyvern. When she saw him, she attacked. No larger than a dog, but she was all claws and teeth. He could have shot her dead, of course, but remember this is a story about a fool. She ripped open his belly and shattered his hips, and he never even drew his dagger.

“And they both lived, somehow. He sewed up his own guts and survived the fire in the blood that comes with that kind of wound. He brought her a roebuck to feed on when he finally managed to take one down. His aim was off, because of the fever, I suppose, or the deer could hear him dragging himself through the woods.

“But they both lived. And after they could travel, they found that they had to move farther and farther south. Farther and farther away from civilized people who wanted nothing to do with a wyvern. Farther from woodlands that had no place for a crippled ranger.

“And do you know, that even after all that, he managed to do something even more foolish? Do you know what he did?

“He joined the circus.”



In her workroom, Munaa yr Oma el Jhotos, High Vizar of Almraiven, collapsed onto a couch. Drawing in the demon’s leash had proven far more difficult than she anticipated.

She held no illusions about her own powers. She might be counted among the mighty in a city famous for its mages, but the making of the leash was far beyond her. It had been very nearly outside her ability to hold it.

But the demon was once again imprisoned in the apostoleum beneath the plain. Her grandfather’s bindings were woven anew. She was confident they would hold.

She considered whether the risk had been worth the taking. The el Jhotos heir had escaped, along with her grandfather’s former assassin and one or two others.

Pouring the last of the wine she’d brought from the WeavePasha’s sanctum, she decided that, on balance, the night must be judged a success. She had not managed the death of the one her grandfather thought might one day be a threat, but she had managed the death of the one he feared.

Exhausted, she raised the glass to her lips, then spit out the wine.

It had gone bitter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The efreet have flesh like a man,
and blood like a man.
But their minds are fire,
and they have no souls at all.
—Janessar Proverb

THE DESERT HAD A VOICE, AND IT WAS BOTH WIND AND earth.

Sometime in the last hours of the night, between Corvus's unacknowledged eulogy of Mattias and the rising of the sun at their backs, the ground they trudged across changed in character, as spell-warped stone gave way to salt and sand.

The wind rose with the sun, and when he heard it, Cephas looked to Ariella, seeking confirmation that it carried a strangeness on it. But the woman did not raise her head. Like the others, she walked forward with a drawn face and an exhausted gait. If she heard anything unusual in the air, she did not speak of it.

They all heard the first cracks from the ground, though. As he had been since Trill left them, Corvus was at the front of their ragged line. He stumbled backward, falling into Shan

when the sharp series of staccato blasts sounded from the ground before him. A sheet of sand flew up, marking the path of a fissure that appeared with the threatening noise.

The ground beneath them shifted, and Cephas caught Ariella's hand, the two of them clinging to each other for balance. After a moment more of rumbling, the trembling in the ground subsided, followed by a hissing sound as fine white sand rushed down a slope into the crack that broke the exposed bedrock.

"An earthquake," said Ariella. "They are common along the southern coasts of the Sea of Fallen Stars. The tectonic force of the earthsouled, but on a tremendous scale."

Cephas took a water skin proffered by Shan and nodded thanks. "Natural then," he said, passing the water to Ariella. "Elder Lin's Old Mother waking to greet the day."

Corvus waved Shan away when she brought the water to him. He had a kerchief of homespun cloth in one hand, and he knotted it into a headpiece that hooded his eyes.

"Not natural," he croaked, taking up the slow pace once more. "Not here."



Exhaustion and grief kept Cephas quiet throughout the endless morning. Time was hard to measure when the sun loomed so large, but it was high in the sky, and the last signs of the badlands had disappeared behind them, when he decided to remind Corvus of Mattias's assurances to them.

"This is the morning Corvus Nightfeather finally tells the whole truth about something," Cephas said, surprised by the bitter tone in his voice.

Corvus came to an immediate halt, and in that instant, Cephas realized the kenku frightened him like no other person or beast he had ever known.

"No, Shan," said Corvus, without turning.

Cephas looked down and saw that the halfling woman's parrying knife lay along the inside of his thigh, its wicked edge pressing a furrow into his silver skin along the major artery there. Shan was not watching him, but he could see there was no expression on her face beyond exhaustion.

He stayed still and counted three heartbeats pulsing against the knife's edge before she rolled the blade over the back of her hand, crisply sheathed it, and walked on, passing Corvus to take the lead.

She paused when Ariella spoke. All three of the others, Corvus joining Shan and Cephas, turned when Ariella said, "Adept." The swordmage's blade was out of its scabbard, the pure white light coiling about it visible even in the highsun glare. "You would have died with him."

Shan raised her gaze to meet Ariella's, still expressionless. If any communication passed between the women, Cephas did not understand it. Shan simply turned and walked on.

"Wait," said Corvus. "Cephas is right. The old man meant to buy more than time, and I owe him an attempt at honesty."

Shan stopped, but did not turn around. She stood, her stance wavering slightly, staring west. I have never seen anyone so tired, thought Cephas. He realized, as he thought it, that he was ignoring Corvus's words. Perhaps it was already too late. Perhaps the dawn was the only time for such a telling, coming as it did between the darkest part of the night and the first glimmers of light. A time of shadows.

"The WeavePasha, on my advice, meant to make a weapon of you," said Corvus.

Cephas thought, I am already a weapon. He thought this as he pulled his double flail from the clips on his armored shoulders, diving to one side, because he saw that Shan was not wavering as he'd thought. The halfling woman was not trembling in exhaustion but in preparation, seeing what he did; the giant, fiery warriors striding toward them from the west.

“No!” shouted Corvus, as Ariella, too, made ready for battle, casting a glamour on her sword and calling the wind, rising into the air. “These are the ones we expected, the guardians I told you would come!”

Even Shan was confused by the kenku’s words, shooting him a questioning look and hesitating, darts at the ready. Cephas counted six crimson-skinned brutes who doubled him in height, and at least that many smaller figures among them, one of whom floated on a pillar of fire. Ariella shouted, “Those are efreet coming! Not djinn!”

A deep voice came from above. “The djinn, little sister, are already here.”

And they were, descending on every side by the dozen.



The djinn outnumbered the efreet, but the huge warriors among the fiery elementals did not appear concerned. Bare-chested and sporting gleaming white horns, unarmored except for brass rings woven into their kilts, the efreet, acting as bodyguards to the one they called the cinderlord, wielded massive bronze tulwars, weapons so huge that Cephas doubted even Tobin could lift one. Thinking of the goliath and his likely fate, Cephas grimaced.

The cinderlord was the smallest among the efreet, but he was the only one whose clothing and accoutrement came close to matching the finery that even the djinni soldiers wore.

Unlike the efreet, the djinn appeared to have no legs. The silver and blue skin of their bared torsos gave way to whirling cyclones of the same colors. There were swordsmen among them, and staff-wielding magi, and three women with metallic bows who stayed high above the makeshift meeting ground where Cephas and his companions stood, disarmed and immobilized by magic.

“Why aren’t they battling?” asked Cephas.

For the first time since he met her, Ariella spit. “Because the kenku has no plans to honor his friend’s last wishes, is my guess.”

Corvus must have heard her, though he did not respond. He had not spoken since the parties of elemental entities surrounded them, setting the companions up like pieces on a game board. Shan heard, but her reaction was not directed at Ariella. She leveled a troubled stare at the back of the kenku’s head.

“Last wishes?” said the cinderlord, hissing like steam from wet wood thrown on a hot fire. “Are you granting wishes again, Shahrokh? First, I wish that all mine come out the way I imagine them. That is one.”

The laughter of the other efreet was like a forest fire.

Shahrokh, the huge djinn man who had announced their presence to Ariella, waited for the efreet to quiet before he responded. “My little sister speaks of the late Mattias Farseer, son of fire. This last night, he fell to the demon that rules the Plain of Stone Spiders.”

The cinderlord’s ruby eyes held no pupils, so Cephas could not tell which of the prisoners in particular he was looking at when he leaned down, studying them. “There is much news in what you say, son of air. The WeavePasha makes use of the Spider That Waits after keeping it leashed for a century? A mythic champion troubles us no longer?” The blaze of the lord’s hair roared, and it leaned even closer. “One among our captives is of the Long Lost?”

“Do not trouble yourself, son of fire,” said Shahrokh. “You recognize the kenku. You see there are windsouled here, and one of them is the returned heir of Marod el Arhapan. But he does not require the cleansing you agreed to perform. He escaped the Almraivenar’s city before any traps were set in him.”

The efreeti examined first Cephas, then Ariella, pupil-less eyes flickering up and down. A tongue of fire, somehow

immobile, appeared between his white fangs, and the tip of his enormous red nose trembled.

“No,” he agreed. “There is nothing of mortal magic about this pair, except in the armor they both wear and in the one’s paltry blade, which I see you have locked. This pleases me. Participating in your tiresome plots with the Calimien vassals was the most odious part of this business.”

Shahrokh glowered. “Be thankful, son of fire, that we are so close to realizing our shared goal. You are far from Memnon, and my warriors are well practiced at snuffing out flames.”

The cinderlord chuckled, and sparks flew from his mouth. “The pride of the djinn. So vast. So easily injured.”

The djinni growled. “I have suffered your stink in my nostrils long enough. Your role here, since I have no need of your scouring flames, is only to witness the return. Once that is confirmed, you may return to Memnon to ensure the match, and when the moon has turned, we will meet again in the Teshyllal Wastes, each with his half of the manuscript.”

“That is my most fervent wish, son of air, as you well know. If the kenku has done as you say, I trust that you will take steps to ensure you do not lose your half yet again.”

Thunder sounded, but the wind that rose with it held no hint of rain. “There will be no further delays, son of fire,” Shahrokh said. “Corvus Nightfeather, you are released from my bonds. The path to your demi-planar cache is restored.”

Corvus’s shoulders sagged, and Cephas realized that the invisible bonds holding the kenku must have been much tighter than those that held him and the others.

“What is this, Corvus?” he asked. “Am I this missing half?”

Corvus said, “I am sorry,” though he did not seem to be speaking to anyone present.

The kenku walked a few steps away from the others and passed his ebony claws before his breast feathers. His hand darted in, and when it came out, it held an object Cephas

recognized. Gripped in the kenku's taloned hand was Azad the Free's *Book of Founding Stories*.

"Lords of the Firestorm!" shouted Corvus, using his ringmaster's voice for the first time since Argentor. "I bring you the artifact stolen by Azad adh Arhapan when he fled the city of Calimport. It is unsullied, protected, and disguised yet by the magic of the djinn. Behold, the Book of Calim! Penned by his holy hand, conceived of the covenant of fire, the sole and sacred source of the Ritual of the Rising Wind. Blessed Calim's assurance of the restoration that is coming!"

The howls and cries of the efreet and the djinn were not so different from each other. They nearly drowned out the ragged whisper Corvus's voice dropped to, but Cephas heard him.

"The book," Corvus said, "that will return your terrible masters to this world."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

O Calimport! City of Glory!
I weep to know you fell!
O Calimport! City of Slaves!
I weep to know you ever stood.
—“The Southsong of Runted T’Emma”
(undated)

SHAHROKH BUILT A SHIP OUT OF SAND AND SUMMONED invisible servants to drag it across the endless dunes at terrifying speed. Their pace outstripped Trill’s greatest efforts, and if there were any features that distinguished one part of the Calim Desert from another, they passed so quickly that Cephas did not witness them.

Conversation was impossible, as the djinni made no accommodation for the terrific wind of their passage, and the effect it had on his mortal passengers. Cephas huddled on a gritty bench with Ariella, the couple doing their best to shield each other from the element they ordinarily embraced. Shan found a place in the bucking vessel’s prow that was something like a cave and tucked herself inside.

Corvus stood apart from the others, feathers ruffling wildly, with his taloned hands curled around the low wall that encircled the deck.

Finally, in the first communication any of them had exchanged since the djinni set them aboard the magic craft, Corvus extended his arm, pointing.

Cephas and Ariella looked up, able to fully open their eyes at last because the craft began to slow. Shan rolled from her place beneath the prow and stood as the ship gained altitude, leaving the sandy desert floor far below. They took in the extraordinary view ahead.

Shahrokh flew down from the cloud of djinni escorts who paced them, pausing a moment to speak. “Look on Calimport!” he said. “Faint echo of the lost First City of the Djinn, but still the mightiest city of the mortal world!”

The companions were silent for a moment. “It’s like flowers,” Ariella finally said, “growing from a broken vase.”

A kaleidoscope of color and motion, the palaces, temples, manors, and fountains visible in the distance shamed even the most exotic blossoms of the WeavePasha’s gardens. And the tumult of fallen and shattered structures that spread out beneath floating buildings for leagues in every direction was certainly broken. They even matched the terra-cotta color of pottery. The architectural flowers floated above this broken city with no towers or spires that could be said to be stems. Upper Calimport floated on invisible foundations of magic.

Shahrokh’s vessel of sand began to slow, angling toward a floating palace that was, if anything, more spectacular than all the others. But Cephas’s eyes were not drawn to its towering minarets and airy gardens open to the sky above. Instead, he looked down, to one of the few areas in the city below free of rubble.

The palace they were approaching floated above an arena.

He leaned over the side, anxious to see if there were gladiators at combat, hopeful that there were not. Ariella pulled him back, just as the sand ship floated between two

marble pillars that framed an entryway to a veranda paved with invisible stones.

Dozens of windsouled genasi stood waiting for them, and as Shahrokh's magical conveyance blew away on the wind, one taller than the rest approached with arms wide open. His voice, familiar to Cephas from his own speech but also from faded memory, boomed across the courtyard.

"Marod yn Marod! Oh, my son, my long-lost son!"



Cephas stood on an invisible balcony, staring down at the Djen Arena far below. There were no gladiators on its sands. Earlier, while he was drying from his bath, there had been a chariot race in the neighboring Sabam Arena. He had walked out onto the balcony and watched the crowds streaming away from the race, realizing the number of people he saw in that one instant was greater than all he had seen before in his life.

He thought about what he had been told so far. The balcony was outside the towering doors of *his* suite of rooms. The bath chamber was staffed by *his* servants—the djinni Shahrokh had been particular on that point; they were servants, not slaves. Whatever their status, he sent the dozen watersouled women away after they had shown him what use he was expected to make of the many soaps, brushes, and perfumes arrayed around the enormous copper cauldron overflowing with steaming water.

These gold-threaded silk trousers and this elaborately stitched brocade vest were *his*, as were the clothes that filled the cedar cabinets, teak armoires, and lavish closets of his rooms.

"You have many questions," Marod el Arhapan had said, speaking to all of them, but looking at Cephas. "But you are also exhausted. I have ordered chambers prepared for our guests, Son, and your rooms are appointed with every

luxury. I will not pretend we know each other yet, but please allow me to offer such refreshment as is in my power before we begin to correct that terrible lapse."

The four companions were then separated, each rushed away in the company of at least one djinni and several windsouled attendants—all but Cephas. Only the vizar djinni, Shahrokh, accompanied him on the long walk through high-ceilinged passages and across many open-air courtyards.

"Allow me to anticipate you, Marod yn Marod," said the djinni. "Both of your companions sent here by the firesouled Memnonar live, and neither your father nor I had any hand in that. The windsouled stablemaster who acted as their agent in the lower city was identified and killed by your father's order, unfortunately before I was allowed to question him. You will find that your father is sometimes … impetuous. The man had already sold them, and they were turned into the pits below the Djen. My agents seek them there now, and I trust the search will not be long in bearing fruit. There are few goliaths in the pens, and though the halflings are there in numbers, the woman's talents will no doubt leave an easily followed trail."

Cephas had to think back over what the djinni had said carefully after the fact, because all he heard at first was that name. Marod yn Marod. Marod, the son of Marod. Son of the master of games, the man who owned this tremendous floating castle, who wielded enormous influence in this ancient, magical city.

The man who owned stables of gladiatorial slaves.

The man who was his father.

While he poured scented water over himself, Cephas went over all he had learned in just the last two days. His mother had died at the hands of Azad the Free. His father directed the Games she died in—if he believed Corvus Nightfeather. Corvus, it seemed, acted as an agent for at least three different warring factions: the WeavePasha of Almraiven, the

djinn of Calimport, and the efreet of Memnon. And learning all that came after he found a way to wear a new body, to express a new *soul*. After he had found Ariella….

When he finished washing, he discovered that someone had removed the rags his clothing had become from where he'd tossed them in the corner. He walked into the bedchamber and found a light linen robe lying across the curtained bed.

He had left his armor at the foot of that bed and found that it had been freshly oiled, the scale pieces arrayed on a rack along one whitewashed wall. Whoever cleaned the armor had even mended a strap worn near to parting.

The flail was there, too, also displayed on a stand, very much like the one Azad the Free used for the same purpose.

Azad adh Arhapan, he thought. *Was* he owned by the man everyone agrees is my father? *Did* he use this weapon to kill the woman who bore me?

Cephas unconsciously rested one hand on the blacksmelt boss of the flail's distal end. When he noticed, he jerked his hand away as quickly as if he had seen a scorpion crawling up the chains.



The master of games, alone now, found Cephas on the balcony.

"My domain," said his father, seeing Cephas study the arena below. "And yours. I was told you have great expertise in the Games, though I grieve to know how you gained it. Damn Azad for his disloyalty and his imagined revenge. I gave the man everything a human of the Emirates could ever dream of, and his repayment was to murder my wife and steal my son."

Cephas saw that people were moving across the sands now, drawing great rakes behind them. He could not make

out whether or not they wore collars from this great height. He couldn't bring himself to look at Marod.

After a moment, he said, "I don't know if I will ever touch my flail again. But I think if it were in my hands right now, I might try to kill you."

The pasha's only reaction was to sigh. "Yes, Shahrokh's spy and his stories. I am sure it is too painful right now, but I might like to hear them one day. These people of the shadows we are forced to use for too much of the business of state, they have great talents for taking the truth and shaping it to their own ends. Did he tell you *I* killed my beloved Valandra? Did he tell you I did not know she was born earthsouled?"

Cephas did not look at the other silver-skinned man. "Not exactly, no. He did say it was Azad who killed her, but—"

"But it is more complicated than just that. Yes. I am afraid I lack the subtlety to guess how he warped the tale." The pasha pointed down at the arena. "They're sifting the sands for bits of armor or dropped weapons. Wouldn't do for a champion to fall because he stepped on something sharp."

"Where is … Shahrokh's spy? And my other friends?"

"Ah, well. I cannot say. The kenku and the mute halfling woman insisted they be allowed to go and join the search for the pair the firesouled sent here in some efreeti gambit. The lovely Ariella, though, will join us for dinner."

"I am surprised you bothered to learn her name."

The pasha sighed, then smiled. "I must admit, I know it only because Shahrokh told me. As you will soon learn, there is an enormous amount of work involved in governing a city, much less managing the Games that the people of the lower city love so much. My vizar says that Ariella Kulmina is a member of the Akanûlan Airsteppers Guild, and that she's the first of her nation in anyone's memory to officially visit Calimport." He cracked a wry grin. "That we can attest to, of course. In any case, she will be honored and treated as a

visiting diplomat. As for these other people you've fallen in with, the kenku's agents …"

"His troupe," said Cephas. "They are performers in the circus troupe Corvus leads."

The pasha moved to a gilded wood cabinet and opened its doors. He took a silver pitcher and a pair of simple clay mugs from its interior. "Pomegranate juice," he said, pouring. "Corvus is the kenku? Of course, he had to have some cover story for moving about the realms unmolested; his sort always does. A circus, eh? That's … whimsical."

The pasha eased onto deep cushions held in a framework of glittering black wood. His expression was calculating as he openly studied Cephas. He took a long drink of the juice, then unexpectedly threw the mug over the low wall that marked the edge of the balcony. He leaned forward, gazing back and forth through the invisible floor, and then pointed. "There! See it?"

Cephas looked through the clear floor. Following the line the other man indicated, he saw a hint of motion. The mug, already far below, was soon lost to his view against the sands of the arena floor.

Hands on his knees, his father waited a long moment, watching the groundskeepers move across the sand. "Damn," he said at last. "None of them even saw it. Oh well, it's always a long shot. And an expensive diversion if I *do* happen to hit one. The cups are cheap, but the mewling Ilmatari priests charge outrageous fees for healing head wounds."

Cephas said, "You thought to hit one of them? To drop that stoneware on one of those people down there? What are you trying to demonstrate?"

The pasha sat back in his chair and parted his hands. "Honesty—something I know you have had little experience with. What is the name the slaves called you?"

"You mean Cephas? It is the only name I have known."

“It is not. You remain Marod yn Marod el Arhapan, as you were when your blessed mother birthed you. ‘Cephas’ is a word in the language Shahrokh and the other djinn use. It means ‘son of stone,’ and it is a terrible insult among their people. Did the kenku tell you that?”

“No,” said Cephas, “but …”

“If you had a sister, which Valandra and I dreamed of, she would have been Khanisa yr Valandra el Shelsper, to honor your mother’s family. They were the first earthsouled elevated to the nobility, and my marriage caused great controversy. We planned to cement their place by using a matrilineal name. They told you this story in that village of escaped slaves in the Spires of Mir? When they explained all the other secrets of your *szuldar*?”

Cephas looked at his father. “They explained nothing to me there about my ancestry. That came later. From Corvus.”

“You broke fast with Acham el Jhotos in Almraiven. A rare honor, to visit those famous gardens. They are watered with the blood of our people—did you know that? Did he tell you that he ordered my father—your grandfather, Marod—beheaded on the walls of that garden in the Year of the Emerald Sun? Did he point out the spot?”

Cephas did not answer.

“Kin of the WeavePasha have died in this city, make no mistake. I work every day to ensure that more will follow them to the Nine Hells. When your grandfather was sent to his death, his hands were bound behind him. But when the WeavePasha’s grandson died a month later, his hands were free, and he held a sword, and a shield. He even bested a half-dozen gladiators before one of the yikaria took him down. He had a chance.”

Cephas said, “I am no friend of the WeavePasha. We fled his city, pursued by wizards throwing fire.”

“Yes, some of his innumerable descendants, no doubt. Tell me, Son, what did you do to offend him? He is known the

world over as one of the most powerful mortals alive, so I hope you did not give him insult. Did you attack him?”

Cephas shook his head. “No, nothing like that. He was kind to me, if you must know. He and Corvus quarreled.”

“He and Corvus quarreled,” his father repeated, as if to himself. “The kenku has many masters. A disagreement over the fee, perhaps.”

“No!” said Cephas, tired of being led about as if he yet wore a collar. “El Jhotos meant to—to do something to me. Some magic that would work me into a weapon to be turned against you.”

The pasha considered this. “So Shahrokh told me. I had hoped it was not true. I suppose I cannot blame you—you have spent your life hearing my name cursed, I am sure—but Marod … I must admit, it still tears my heart. How could you agree to it? How could you agree to kill your own father?”

Cephas felt the tug again but could not pull against it. “You know I didn’t know,” he said.

The pasha stood and approached Cephas. He put his hands on Cephas’s shoulders. Cephas had seen few mirrors but had a general idea of what he looked like, even windsouled. The man before him was a mirror sent back in time from twenty years in his own future.

The pasha nodded. “Yes, Son, I did know. And I am sorry that I played a courtier’s game of rhetoric in drawing out the truth. I will not tell you how to judge the actions of the people you have traveled with. I don’t know the full truth of their actions myself. But I do know some truths, and I tell you these plainly.

“I am Marod el Arhapan, Pasha of Pashas of the Holy City of Calimport, Governor of all Calimshan and Holder of the Keys against the Day of Blessed Calim’s Return. I am the Pasha of Games and of Ships and of Trade, and Ambassador to the Djinn of the Plane Below. And I am your father.

“I am an owner of slaves and a killer of men. My wealth is earned by the work of ten thousand people whom I will never see and rarely spare a thought for. And I am your father.

“And I have never, ever lied to you.”



Corvus expected to be separated from the others. He expected the change in demeanor that came of the djinn who floated beside him, and if he had not expected that the handful of windsouled courtiers would disappear as soon as they left the courtyard, it was only because he hadn’t anticipated they would be along for the brief time they were. It was of little consequence. Their only role was to attach the chains.

The chamber the djinni warriors pushed him into after stripping everything from him had no ceiling, and, for a brief moment of vertigo, he thought it had no floor. But beneath his feet was simply more of the transparent rock so much of this floating palace was built on.

“Just an earthmote in disguise,” he said.

“Oh, it is much more than that, Corvus Nightfeather.” Shahrokh entered the round room from above, a battered cylinder held in his large hands. “Here. A gift.”

Corvus accepted the cylinder but dropped it almost instantly as he collapsed in pain to the transparent floor. He felt as if all his feathers had been plucked at once.

“Be calm. You are still intact. Though that is not what the cinderlord proposed, by the way. He thought a celebration was in order once we agreed the book is real, and he suggested we pluck you and roast you over coals. If there is a more barbaric race in the universe than the efreet, then we have not encountered it in a hundred thousand years of exploration.”

Corvus found that he could speak, after a fashion. “Perperhaps if your people … had not spent so much of that time exploring the insides of bottles, slaves to the whims of m-mortals …” He braced for another wave of magical torture, but none came.

“An insult that was old before your people lost their power of flight,” said Shahrokh, unperturbed. He gestured, and the curved length of old metal floated back into his hand. “The pain was no work of mine, by the way. Merely an ancillary effect that came when all your active rituals and contingencies were disrupted by this item. I must admit, I had hoped the famous nest would spill its contents from your chest, but the possibility was small. Lost to the cosmos, I suppose.”

Corvus managed to lift his head from the floor. His view of the city below was washed in red mist, whether from the blood still running from his eyes or that already pooled on the floor, he could not guess. “Djinni magic is more finely cast in stories,” he said. “Perhaps the cinderlord could adjust your toy there so that it works as intended. Certainly the WeavePasha could.”

Shahrokh’s laughter sounded friendly. “Oh, even those two worthies could do little with this relic,” he said. “Its full restoration of power must await the return of my Lord Calim. This is a fragment of a destroyed artifact of the old world, sifted out of the rubble below. It is a segment of the storied Taros Hoop, repurposed by an elf slave to leech magic.”

Corvus wondered if he could stand yet, then thought better of it. “Your dependence on mortal magic is as great as your dependence on mortal society. Does the pasha know you are mining the ruins for old human relics?”

Shahrokh laughed again, though this time his laugh was less genuine. In other circumstances, Corvus might have described it as polite. “Like all the windsouled, he knows exactly what I tell him and no more, kenku. You know this.”

“I wonder,” Corvus said. “Perhaps you underestimate him, as you have his son. Though of the two, I imagine it will be the boy who kills you.” He struggled to his feet, and in doing so, saw that the blurriness of the buildings below was not in his vision, but was an imperfection in the transparent stone itself. Unlike the flagstones in the courtyard, this room was floored with floating crystal of less-than-perfect clarity.

“They will kill each other long before the thought of raising a hand against me enters either of their thick skulls,” said Shahrokh. He looked down. “What are you staring at, assassin? There are no shadows for you to coax to your bidding in this room, even if you still had access to your arts. Why do you think I chose it?”

Corvus took hold of his lower beak and snapped it sharply to the left, correcting a minor displacement that must have come with the fall. “I thought it must be humility. These clear paving stones are from your home clouds in the Elemental Chaos, aren’t they? This one is cloudy itself, so I took it as a demonstration that the djinn and their works are less than perfect. Yes, I see it now. You are apologizing for your ridiculous ego in the only way you can. I am moved, approaching tears, in fact. I wonder if you would send for my short sword so I have something to wipe them away.”

Shahrokh did not laugh this time. He waved, and Corvus fell to the floor again, hard. “That cloudiness is the foundation stone’s power, fool. You think these stones are windows for the windsouled to use to gaze down on their petty holdings? The buildings of Calimport are not earth-motes. They are items of power themselves. The stone you bleed on holds this palace in the sky, and it is the envy of the mighty, even in the Elemental Chaos.”

“Not an apology, then,” Corvus groaned. “In that case, I must admit you have me stumped. Now that you’ve used the magic of a mortal-wrought artifact, restored by a mortal, to disrupt my mortal rituals, why are you still floating there like a duckling on a storm-tossed sea? Are you confused,

Shahrokh? Now that you have the book back—a book stolen by a mortal and returned to you by my efforts—are you at a loss as to what to do next? Need advice from your betters? More help cleaning up messes you made? Please, Shahrokh, do not be shy. I want to help. Sincerely, your wish is my command."

As he spoke, Corvus regained his feet and made a careful study of the floor, then the walls. There was no sign of the door he had been pushed through.

The djinni moved around to where Corvus had no choice but to meet his eyes. "Perhaps," he said, "as you intimate in your ceaseless cawing, I *have* grown too used to the company of mortals. The reason you are still here is that I am curious. I have a question for you."

Corvus decided he was through talking.

"It is a simple question, spy. When did you withdraw from the game?"

Corvus did not look away from the djinni's eyes. He did not blink, and he did not answer.

"Ten years ago," Sharokh said, "when we first approached you, I would never have guessed that it would be the WeavePasha you betrayed instead of us. We believed you would never turn the book over if you managed to locate it, and we had made our preparations assuming that. When you told us to make ready for the el Arhapan whelp to be returned as an instrument of the WeavePasha's will, we even made arrangements should that plan have succeeded. Other windsouled have been prepared to take that family's role in the Rituals of Return. All of that work assuming things would go awry. Yet at some point, you made a decision to do exactly what we asked of you. When was that?"

Corvus said, "I see there has been some mistake. If I have fulfilled my obligations, then I am sure you meant to offer some other reward than to strip me naked and torture me."

Shahrokh considered this. "No, I do not believe we did. Once again, and this is the last time. The third time, which

should please you. When?”

If Corvus could have smirked, he would have. “Never,” he said.

“You will never answer?” asked Shahrokh.

“No, you floating fool. I never did what you asked.”



When he awoke again, Corvus was in a squalid cell lined with straw, dimly illuminated by gray light falling from far above. The door was open, and a short figure squatted on its heels just beyond the door’s frame. Ah, thought Corvus, raising himself up on his elbows. Now this is what I expected.

The shadowy figure stood, revealed to be a halfling man with an ugly scar running down one side of his face. He threw a bundle at Corvus.

“Bird-head man,” he said. “Ain’t never seen one of them. The slave tattoo looks funny through your feathers. Here’re your tunic and your pail. Tunic’s to wear as clothes, use as bandages, whatever you want, really. Pail’s for slop. The kind that goes in and the kind that goes out, both. Welcome to Calimport Between.”

Corvus rose and cracked his knuckles. He felt the indelible tattoo of windblown sand marking him as a slave as a dull throbbing pain on his forehead, but whatever spell had put it there had also healed the worst of his injuries. He made a swift check of his surroundings, then wasted no further time in pulling the filthy shift over his head and gathering up his pail.

“Don’t you mean Calimport Below?” he asked the man.

The halfling was already walking away. “Sure, bird-head man,” he said. “Whatever you say.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Alas, the only person who could
grant her redemption was herself,
and herself she never thought to ask.
—“When Janna Grew Old”
The Founding Stories of Calimshan

THE HALFLING MAN’S ROLLING GAIT WAS DECEPTIVELY FAST, but Corvus had little trouble keeping up. Despite the trauma of the djinn’s stripping him of his various ritualistic contingencies, he felt energized. Here was a city of nothing *but* shadow, and perhaps he *had* grown too dependent on magic, as Mattias often said.

But would never say again.

He pushed the thought aside. There were some he could save yet.

The halfling led him through corridors that were also streets, between cells that were also roofless cabins built of rubble. He knew it was still some time before sunset, but the sky above looked something like a starry night, though the constellations were none he had ever seen.

He realized the light shining through the flagstones made the manor floors looks like stars from below.

“You still got one more thing needs doing, bird-head man,” the halfling called. “If you’re through lazing away back there.”

Corvus quickened his pace, only to find they had arrived at their destination. This was a doorless building where torches hung from wall sconces. Its smell reminded Corvus of a village potter’s shop.

When he saw what filled the rooms of the house, Corvus’s mood deflated. Every bit of available space was taken up with masks.

Teetering stacks of masks stood at either side of the entryway. The walls were hung with masks nested five or six deep. The terra-cotta pieces, done in relief, represented folk of many races. Corvus saw the faces of humans and halflings by the dozen, but he also saw a large number of orcs, a few dwarves, and scattered here and there, lone representatives of more exotic races. One corner was given over to larger masks, mostly minotaurs. As varied as their features were, the masks all shared one thing in common. There were no openings. Their eyes were shut and their mouths were closed.

Corvus saw that the halfling man was staring at him. “Yeah, I make the death masks for the el Arhapan stable. Usually it’s best to go ahead and get it taken care of right off, in case you don’t make it through your first night. And usually it makes people feel better if I tell them that all the ones you see here is for people that’s still alive.”

“Ah,” said Corvus. “And is that true?”

The halfling pulled a screen of rusty wire and a handful of wooden dowel rods from beneath a table. “No. But it makes people feel better, so that’s what I tell them. Not many think to ask that, bird-head man. You’re pretty smart.”

“Thank you,” said Corvus.

“Smart don’t last too long in the pits,” said the halfling. “You breathe through them holes close to the top of your beak there? How long can you hold your breath?”

Corvus realized why the man was asking and held up his hands. “I am going to pass on your services for now, Master Maskmaker. I’m sure you’ll think me a fool, and I’m sure I’m far from the first who’s said this, but I won’t be here long.”

The halfling looked disappointed but set his equipment back beneath the table. “Too bad,” he said. “You was going to be an interesting challenge. Now it sounds like you’re just going to be an uninteresting challenge.”

Corvus had an idea. He strolled over to the corner where the bull-faced masks were stacked. Other large masks, not minotaurs, were leaned face in against the wall. He lifted the newest of these—its recent firing evident by the lack of dust on its upper edge—and turned it around so he could examine the face it depicted—a goliath. “The masks are cast from life,” he said. “And then what? They’re buried instead of bodies when the slave dies?”

The halfling said, “Yeah. Old Marod has beasts for his Games that need a lot of meat. Frugal man, our owner.”

“I am surprised he pays for this practice, then,” said Corvus. “And now I expect you to tell me that he doesn’t. Or that he don’t, rather.”

The halfling walked over and examined the mask in Corvus’s hands. He appraised the kenku with renewed interest. “Ancient hin tradition, death masks. Maintained for all the slaves of Calimport with dispensations from the Church of Ilmater. I’m going to backtrack to interesting challenge. That’s the Hammer That Falls there in your hands.”

Corvus said, “Hammer That Strikes would be a better stage name for a gladiator.”

The halfling walked over to a cooling rack and removed a much smaller mask, this one of a scowling halfling woman. “Hammer That Strikes is too martial sounding. Your boy

there’s got kind of the opposite approach. Six fights and he ain’t won a one, but somehow he’s still alive.” He pulled another halfling mask from a peg. It was nearly identical to the first, except that instead of a scowl, the face it captured showed a shy smile.

“You’re Corvus Nightfeather,” said the man. “This would have gone a lot quicker if the Hammer had mentioned you’re a bird-head man.”



“Of course Corvus lied to you,” Ariella told Cephas. “He lied to all of us. We already knew that. That doesn’t mean your father is telling the truth.”

Cephas was sure he would have been too distracted for conversation by Ariella’s diaphanous gown had the circumstances been different.

“He admitted he owns slaves and has killed relatives of the WeavePasha,” he said.

“Cephas,” she said, “your father rules the oldest slaveholding city in the world, a city that has been at odds with Almraiven for almost a century. He was never going to convince you he is a hero out of one of your stories.”

“You should listen to the swordmage, Son,” said Marod el Arhapan, striding into the dining room ahead of a train of servants bearing platters of food. “Her reasoning is sound. I have no illusions that the nature of our society could be concealed from you. As I believe that it is a noble and successful society, and our family lives at its apex, neither have I any wish to conceal it. The philosophers of other states who decry the institution of slavery have merely renamed it in their own terms.”

“A long-discredited argument, Pasha,” said Ariella.

El Arhapan waved them to cushions set along a low table. As he sat, he answered her.

“And dismissal of an argument as discredited circumvents the need for the dismisser to offer an argument of her own. Neither of us are debaters of much merit, Ariella. I am a master of games and you are a swordmage, and we will not settle the question of slavery over pepper-crusted goat and citrus jams.”

He clapped twice, and servants rushed in bearing platters the size of shields laden with dozens of tiny ceramic bowls, each overflowing with a different, unrecognizable foodstuff.

Cephas eyed the food with suspicion. The master of games laughed. “I don’t know what most of them are, either, Son,” he said. “They’re always very good, though. Perhaps our guest can be our guide through this meal. She grew up in a legendary kitchen, after all.”

Ariella regarded the man coolly. “Your father thinks to intimidate me by revealing he knows details of my life,” she said to Cephas. To the pasha, she said, “To humor you, yes, I know these foods. They are all very expensive, and most of them are quite rare. Such food as this is reserved in my mother’s establishment for patrons possessed of much gold, but little taste.”

The pasha popped a candied fruit into his mouth and chewed it. He grinned broadly at Ariella, strings of gummy orange caught in his teeth. “Gods, I hope you marry my son. It will give me great pleasure to have you as a daughter-in-law instead of as a state visitor. That way I won’t have to write a letter of apology to your hapless queen when I beat the defiance out of you.”

Ariella laid a warning hand on Cephas’s arm, cautioning him against rising. She did not try to prevent him from speaking, though.

“You feint and dodge like a fencer, Marod el Arhapan!” Cephas snarled. “When will you strike? What game do you think you are mastering with us?”

Before the pasha could reply, there was a commotion at the entryway. The least impressive windsouled man Cephas

had yet seen was trying to get past guards who barred his way. He was remarkably thin, and the color of his skin was closer to dull gray than silver. He affected no finery in his clothing, either, wearing a simple tunic and trousers beneath a much-stained leather apron, sporting sagging pockets full of potion bottles and hand tools. “I must get in! Look, he’s right there! Marod! Marod, I’ve broken her!”

The pasha instantly forgot his meal and his guests. He leaped to his feet. “Excellent! Excellent news, old friend! Let him go, you fools!” The pasha rushed across the room and grasped the other man’s forearm. “I never doubted you!”

The other man laughed. “You never believed I would succeed for a moment. Their wills are legend. I wonder if you’ll be so happy when you learn how much of your gold I spent with the pasha of apothecaries.”

The pasha of games shrugged. “No matter. Your timing is exquisite. I have the perfect opponent lined up.” He whirled to the nearest slave. “Find Shahrokh. Tell him to send criers to the pits and messengers to the great houses. We will have a memorable game tonight!”

With that, he and the other man rushed from the room, leaving Cephas and Ariella to stare after them.

Cephas had learned much from the many people he’d met since he left Jazeerijah.

It doesn’t matter whether you’re a liar or not, el Arhapan, he thought. It doesn’t even matter if you’re the man who sired me. What matters is that you’re the master of games.

Cephas shoved the table away and stood. “We have to find Shan.”



Corvus followed the halfling man down a circular staircase beneath a concealed trapdoor. At the bottom of the steps, they found themselves in a broad passageway floored and

walled with drystone brickwork of a type unlike any Corvus had seen in Calimport Between.

He said, "*This* is Calimport Below."

"Yeah," said the maskmaker. "Good call, bird-head man. This is the Muzhahajaarnadah, or part of it, anyway. The genasi co-opted its most famous nickname when they built their city in the sky. Most of us call it the Muzad. We're going this way."

After many twists and turns, they came to an iron-bound door guarded by a pair of human men, only one of whom, Corvus noticed, bore a tattoo. They obviously recognized the halfling but still halted him with the tips of their spears. "You have to pay for entry, halfling," the tattooed man said. "Same as always."

The halfling shrugged and fished a copper coin from a pouch at his belt. "I have a coin," he said to the guard. From his tone, Corvus decided the statement was something like a password.

"A coin has value," said the tattooed guard, and palmed the copper.

The two humans turned their attention to Corvus, who reflexively reached for his breast feathers, then ruefully made a quick inventory of the sum total of his worldly goods. The sisters' masks were in his pail, and Tobin's larger mask was tucked beneath his arm.

"It ain't the kind of exchange where you lose something, bird-head man," said the halfling. "The price of admission is returned, as long as it's something you truly value."

All three of the Calimien waited, having offered all the guidance they intended. Corvus considered the maskmaker's words. He took the larger mask from beneath his arm and held it out awkwardly in one hand, balancing it against the weight of the pail he held out with the other.

"I have friends," he said.

The man who accepted the halfling's coin nodded. "Friends have value." He set down his spear. He took the

larger mask, holding it very carefully. “Especially friends like the Hammer That Falls.”

The other man opened the door as his partner returned the mask and the copper coin. The chamber beyond was lit with many lanterns, and carpeted with many rugs. A number of people sat inside, drinking tea.

“Corvus!” one of them called, and jumped to his feet. Tobin wore the same kind of shift as Corvus did and had a cushion tied to the top of his head with a length of twine. The cushion’s purpose became obvious when the goliath, on standing, knocked his head against the low stone ceiling. If he felt it, he made no sign. He rushed across the room and gathered Corvus in his huge arms. “I never doubted you would come!”

Corvus held his breath against Tobin’s hug for a moment, then said, “I have not always deserved your faith in me, Tobin Tok Tor, but I swear I will earn it now. I swear this on stone.”

A number of mutters and hisses from the others in the room caused Corvus to look to his halfling guide.

The small man nodded at Tobin. “That there’s the Hammer That Falls. We don’t know that name you used. We don’t want to know it.”

Corvus retraced his memory. “You never told me your name,” he said.

“And you never told me yours. I guessed it, bird-head man, and haven’t used it since. I got no plans to offer up mine or invite you to guess. We don’t use names. That man guarding the door, the one who didn’t talk? Been married to my sister for fifteen years and I got no idea what his name is.”

Corvus considered that. “Does *she* know his name?”

“How should I know?” the halfling answered. “Last I heard, they live down by the docks where I can’t go. I’d have to send a letter to ask, and I wouldn’t know who to address it to, now would I?”

Other than the two companions and the halfling man, there were a half-dozen people in the room, evenly divided by gender and representing a gamut of races and roles across Emirate life.

Corvus identified a man who bore no tattoo, but who did wear the symbol of the Crying God as a priest of Ilmater, a member of the only clergy still active in the Skyfire Emirates. A dwarf woman next to Tobin's place in the circle was obviously a gladiator, and the man next to her wore silks like those of the courtiers in the el Arhapan palace. This man was a firesouled genasi, but Corvus had no doubt he expressed windsoul when he was in Calimport Above. The other three were all slaves, a pair of human women and another halfling man; this one with a demeanor so forgettable that Corvus was sure it had taken years to perfect.

Finally, he said, "You're Janessar. A resistance cell."

The maskmaker shrugged and took a cup of tea. "That ain't a particular person's name," he said. "That's a name lots of folks have heard."

Fair enough, thought Corvus. He leaned over and removed the masks from his pail. "Whoever you are," he said, "if you are foes of the genasi of Calimport Above and dedicated to the freeing of slaves, you should know that my intention is to leave this city, and soon. When I go, I will take the Hammer here with me, and a windsouled couple now in the el Arhapan palace. And I will take the women whose masks these are."

He laid them side by side, scowl and smile.

None of them, not even Tobin, responded.

Eventually, the maskmaker inhaled deeply, then sighed long and loud. "You were right earlier. When you said I'd think you a fool and that I'd heard all kinds of crazy escape talk before. Half right, anyway. I never met a fool quite so big, or heard talk quite so crazy."

It was Tobin who answered. “We will do it without you, then,” he said.

The halfling looked at his companions. Again, he shrugged.

The dwarf woman next to Tobin leaned in and tapped her split fingernail on Shan’s mask. “This one is with the dressers—has been all afternoon. They’re measuring her for leathers and laying out blades for her to choose from. She doesn’t talk, like the first one, but she hasn’t killed any of the overseers. The stablemasters think they’ve been given a second shot at glory—this one is more like a gladiator than her sister. There are a lot of windsouled around her. Difficult to spring, but perhaps not impossible.”

The firesouled man said, “I can get a message to the heir and the Akanûlan woman, but little more. The master of games has allowed them their weapons, though, and they seem capable. Perhaps if there was a coordinated effort.”

Corvus clicked his tongue. “But this is excellent news!” he said. He pointed to the other mask. “What about Cynda?”

Tobin sniffed. “That is why I was here talking to them, Cor—bird-head man. I have come every day for five days. They will not help me find her, because they believe she is dead.”

The maskmaker looked at Tobin, the expression of sympathy on his face the first sign of anything but artful distance Corvus had noted there. “The ones that get taken up to the Spiritbreaker always come back in a few turns of the glass, Hammer, a day at most. When did she kill that last overseer? Six days ago? Seven?”

Unaccountably, Tobin grinned at Corvus. “See, this is the sticking point, and they will not budge on it. You will be very impressed with me, Ringmaster. I have spotted a flaw in their logic.”

Corvus had as well. “I’m guessing that recalcitrant fighters are taken to some arcanist or dark priest who charms them,” he said. “The strongest of them last little time before they are returned and take up arms on the sand, but our friend

never came back. You believe this means she did not survive whatever spells were laid on her."

The Ilmatari priest spoke for the first time. "Or they killed her when her resistances proved too expensive to overcome. They would have measured her value in the arena against the cost of forcing her to fight. I am sorry, kenku. The Hammer That Falls has spoken of your friend at great length, and it is clear that hers was a rare and gentle soul."

Corvus nodded. "Rare and gentle and possessed of a greater strength of will than all of us in this room combined. You believe she set a precedent in resisting them until she died. I tell you the precedent is something more than that. She resists them still. El Arhapan is a sadist and an obsessive, and probably the finest judge of fighters in all Faerûn. He will go to any length to break Cynda's will, and she will go to any length to resist. And survive. She lives. I assure you, she lives."

The maskmaker spread his hands. He asked, "What do you want us to do?"



Cephas and Ariella quickly established the boundaries of their luxurious prison. They were confined to one wing of the el Arhapan manor, but they soon learned that left a lot of room to cover.

"Four suites of private rooms, including our two," said Cephas. "The dining chamber, two or three rooms full of couches and cushions, a half-dozen verandas and balconies. And whatever this place is."

Ariella did not turn from her careful study of the map that made up the floor in the final room they had explored. It showed the city and its environs as far east as the Plain of Stone Spiders and as far west as a wavering line running from the Marching Mountains in the North all the way to the

sea in the South. “The disputed boundary between Calimien and Memnonar influence,” she said.

At least they were no longer troubled by the slaves and servants who had initially followed their every step, offering refreshments, baths, or intimate companionship. These men and women greeted Cephas’s attempt to recruit them in an escape attempt with confusion that turned to anger when he persisted. Finally, he himself grew angry enough to chase the staff through a door he and Ariella were denied passage through by an implacable djinni sorcerer who, Ariella advised, was better ignored than engaged.

Now, once again wearing their armor over the simplest clothes they could find, they studied the contents of el Arhapan’s map room.

“I see where Manshaka is meant to be,” said Ariella. “And I suppose this glyph indicates the ruins of Schamedar. But what are these numbers in the deep desert east of the Calim River, beyond the Crying God’s Redoubt at Kelter?”

“I believe I know,” said Cephas. “Corvus said el Arhapan leaves the city only to travel to Manshaka or to training camps in the desert. And see, the glyphs for that city are the only ones besides the numbers picked out in gemstones. They look like the symbols around Corvus’s platform.”

“Of course!” said Ariella. “This is not a map. It’s a teleportation circle. An ornate one, designed for just a few locative combinations. That is, if we’re to believe what the kenku said about those camps.”

Before Cephas could answer, a windsouled courtier flew through the open window. Cephas brought his flail up into a ready position, but, to his shock, the man appeared to catch fire.

“He’s transitioning to firesouled!” said Ariella.

“Cephas Earthsouled,” the man said. “Listen. If you are your mother’s son and not your father’s, the house of el Arhapan must fall. Find the foundation stone, and remember the fire at Argentor.”

The man’s skin shifted from silver to burnished copper, and his crystalline hair burned away in flames that persisted around his scalp. “Ariella Kulmina. I am not the only firesouled hidden in this house.”

Those were his last words before Shahrokh flew into the room on a cyclone that flashed lightning. He gestured and the stranger rose into the air, struggling against unseen attackers.

“The kenku’s last words puzzled me,” the djinni said to the trapped man, ignoring Cephas and Ariella. “But the message they hid is now found out. You will show me where your pathetic conspiracy has hidden him in the sewers.” With that, the djinni swept the firesouled genasi back through the window.

Unable to intercede, Ariella and Cephas watched Shahrokh and his captive vanish into the distance.

Cephas turned to her. “I believe the ringmaster has just cued the last act.”



Far below, Marod el Arhapan paced back and forth in the luxurious box of the master of games. He was impatient at the slow pace of the crowds filing in, but exultant to be at his rightful place behind the lectern. *This* was his place; *this* was his role. Playing Shahrokh’s political games, parrying with his hopeless son, even warring against the cursed WeavePasha … All of it paled next to the exhilaration of the arena.

An aide approached with a slate covered in chalked figures. After a quick glance, he dashed it onto the ground, the shattered pieces crunching beneath his boots. “No, fool! There will be no other matches on the card. The fight we witness tonight is a fight for the ages! No one will need to be warmed up for this!”

He took his seat, eager for the night to truly begin. He had forced twins to fight one another before, of course.

But never twins who also happened to be Arvoreeni adepts.



Inside the hidden chamber tucked away in Calimport Below, the priest raised his head. “Shahrokh comes,” he said. Then he added, “I fear our friend did not survive the task we set him.” He looked at the others, then at Corvus. “His name was Ravin. He was an excellent chess player.”

All the Jannisars said, in chorus, “His name was Ravin. We will remember.”

Corvus felt helpless. Things were going badly before they had properly begun. He paused in his furious calculations. “Ravin,” he said, committing the name to memory. “I will remember.”

The others began to file out of the chamber, making use of a hidden way on the wall opposite. The maskmaker waved them through, urging speed. He said to Corvus, “Shahrokh is a skylord of the djinn. There are none here who can stand against him.”

Corvus said, “Go, and continue your work. Live.”

The halfling nodded once, and disappeared into the passageway. Once he closed the secret opening, it was undetectable.

Beside him, Tobin said, “Those Janessar are some pretty stout fellows. Can *we* stand against this Shahrokh?”

“Not even for an instant,” said Corvus. “If you know a way to the Djen Arena, go there and do anything you can to delay the fight between Shan and Cynda. I will deal with the skylord.”

“I know a way to the arena, Corvus, but you should not sacrifice yourself. You just said we cannot stand against him!”

“Good friend,” Corvus said, “there are sacrifices I have not told you of yet. But you must go now. I will not try to stand against Shahrokh. As I said, I will *deal* with him.”

“They’re still out there,” said Ariella. “At least a dozen as far as I can tell.”

Djinn swarmed the el Arhapan manor in numbers allowing no possibility for the windsouled pair to escape by air. Below, the Djen Arena was lit by enormous floating lamps, the stands nearly full. Cephas did not know what to expect, but he feared that the match his father had planned would mean death for some or all of his missing companions.

“If only the firesouled had told us what this foundation stone was!” he said. “And whether I’m meant to set it afire or throw it over the side, or something else.”

“I wish we hadn’t chased all the servants away,” Ariella said. “Perhaps they’d know what he meant by his message.”

“The servants have all fled the manor, windsouled.” The voice came from the far end of the hall. “I do not know what thorn you have thrust in Shahrokh’s side, but he has made this house a prison, and now only we remain on this ridiculous floating hovel.” Other words were murmured below these, in another’s voice.

Ariella did not hesitate. She drew her sword and released it with a whispered word of power. It spun past Cephas, down the long hallway, and into the neck of Lavacre, the tall, fat firesouled ambassador from Akanûl. He was still translating when it struck, and Cephas saw the man’s lips moving even as blood poured from between them.

“At least his last words were in the holy language,” Cephas said to Flamburnt. The short man watched the sword extricate itself and sail into Ariella’s waiting hand.

He ran.

Shan sat, waiting.

She had listened to Cephas talk about arena fighting to Tobin and the others during their journey across the Tethyrian highlands. She knew that the crowd played some role in the fighting, that their cheers or catcalls affected the morale of the gladiators.

Shan was not a gladiator.

For the twentieth time since the Calimien slaves turned her into this small room, she checked her equipment. The armor was not the equal of that she usually wore, but it was of good quality. Her style of fighting depended more on avoiding blades altogether, anyway, than the hack-and-slash Cephas and Tobin favored.

After she had considered and rejected a hundred or so blades in the outfitting rooms, a djinni had appeared, apparently an unprecedented occurrence to judge by the way the windsouled overseers bowed and scraped. The elemental dropped a package wrapped in oilcloth at her feet, then flew away. When she unrolled it, Shan found her own sword and parrying dagger.

These now hung at their customary places at her hip and over her shoulder. The scabbards were new, so she had rubbed fish oil into them to ensure smooth draws, after she had given up on making the Calishites understand she wanted tallow for the job.

They were afraid of her, although she had offered no resistance. They let her wander from room to room until she came to a kitchen and found the pot of oil.

She wished she had tried harder for the tallow. The fish oil would suffice, but the smell in the small ready room was driving her to distraction.

The fish oil conjured memories of a hill village far away, secreted above a brackish swamp that provided access to the sea. They traded with the halflings of the marshland, mutton and leather for dried fish and nuts and news of the

wider world—and fish oil. Until this moment, she would have guessed it was the news she would come to curse the most.

News of the wider world meant glory and adventure, concepts she greeted with suspicion and that her sister greeted with wide-eyed wonder. Eventually, it meant the abbey and the deep training of the Defender's Way, and then the wandering years the Way required. It meant word from the village of a monster that would come to steal hers and her sister's voices. It was word of a halfling monastery razed by unknown enemies.

She shook her head. Damn that smell.

She checked again. The straps of the armor were tight. The draw of the weapons was smooth.

Shan did not know what she would face when the doors opened. Nor did she care, because she had no intention of fighting for the entertainment of the people outside, who must number in the thousands from the noise they raised.

Her plan was simple enough. She would scan the crowd for people who looked important. She would go to where they were and kill them until just a few remained. She would hold the last of them hostage and somehow make herself understood. They would bring Cynda. Then the two of them would leave this terrible place and go somewhere else. They would go to the next part of their lives.

The plan would have been even simpler if Mattias were alive. He would have found a way to sneak in and bring Cynda out undetected, or to swoop down from the air with Trill and pluck her out of her prison. If nothing else, he could have destroyed the arena.

If Corvus were there to direct her—and if she still trusted him—her role would have simply been to kill until someone told her to stop. Probably Cynda—it was almost always Cynda who found a way to stay Shan's hand.

She checked her equipment again. Damn the smell of the oil.

Shahrokh was forced to dissipate the lower part of his body in order to pass through the door, but he in no way appeared diminished. Rage spilled from the djinni, elemental power radiating from him so strongly that Corvus would have been hard-pressed to stay conscious if he had been more sensitive to such emanations.

Even so, he felt buffeted by more than just the wind that blew from the towering djinni. Corvus was glad he had chosen to await Shahrokh from a reclined position, propped up against a pile of pillows and drinking tea.

Shahrokh opened his hand and tossed a familiar object into the room. The *Book of Founding Stories* bounced and spun, its pages rifling. Corvus hoped the carpets protected the book's covers from any damage.

"You will tell me where you have hidden the Book of Calim!" roared Shahrokh.

Corvus's reply was calm. "Yes. I will."

"Why is there a goliath on the sand?" asked the pasha of games. He turned to his aide. "I told you there will be no other matches!"

"There are none, Pasha, I swear it!" the aide cried. "Look! He is alone. There are none for him to fight!"

"Then what is he doing?" demanded el Arhapan.

The aide had no answer. He was as mystified as the pasha when the crowd roared—particularly because they roared with laughter.

Flamburnt was fast for a man of his particular size and shape, but he was no match for Cephas in his windsouled form. The ambassador made it no farther than the central veranda before the gladiator brought him down.

The firesouled had no fear in his eyes when he looked at Cephas. That emotion did not appear until he glanced back down the gallery—where Ariella was taking her leisure in joining them. Cephas shifted his weight, raising his knee from the man's throat.

Flamburnt struggled but could not throw Cephas off. "You are the earthsouled son of el Arhapan," he said, talking fast. "It is your death you lean over. I am a wizard of the highest degree and an initiate of the Sacred Hunter's Lodge in the holy city of Memnon. The flames that devour your soul will be set by my hand!"

Corvus leaned closer. "These soul-scouring flames, you can call them up before I toss you over the side?"

"Perhaps a deal can be struck!" said Flamburnt. "Call off the swordmage and tell me what it is you need explained."

Ariella had reached them. "Ask him why two Cabalists of Memnon or Airspur or wherever they're from are skulking about a Calimien palace."

Flamburnt spit his response. "We were to act as observers, to ensure that the djinn did not manage to lose their half of the Ritual of Return yet again. But of course they've managed just that!"

Cephas remembered the pronouncements of the elementals in the desert but decided he was more concerned with the lives of his friends than the plots of the insane. "I am told," he said, "that this house has a foundation stone, though the words sound out of place in the sky. Do you know what that means?"

"Of course I do," Flamburnt said, rolling his eyes. "The windsouled build these extravagances atop mystic air quarried from the cliffs of the Plane Below. The foundation stone is a sort of keystone in reverse—it is the means of gravitational defiance. Somewhere in the center of this manor is a chamber open to sky, containing an elemental matrix that's both wind and earth."

Both wind and earth, thought Cephas.

“I know that because I read it in a children’s primer, buffoon,” said Flamburnt. “Such knowledge hardly seems worth bargaining for.”

Cephas said, “If you say so.” He removed his weight from the man, letting Ariella take his place above the firesouled mage. “I know what to do,” he said to her.

Then, ignoring Flamburnt’s cries of protest, he flew.



The wizard known as the Spiritbreaker stood with his hand on the shoulder of his finest work. The halfling woman remained motionless, a short sword in one hand and a parrying knife in the other. Neither he nor the other genasi in the room was concerned about the bared steel, even though both pieces were possessed of considerable magical potency. The Spiritbreaker’s control of the woman was absolute. He had broken the mind of an Arvoreeni adept.

He asked his assistant, “Have they cleared the sands yet?”

She shook her head. “He’s still out there. He keeps slipping away at the last moment and causing the yikaria to stumble. I don’t sense any magic, so I cannot explain where he’s finding all those pastries. Perhaps his pockets? Those *are* enormous pants.”

The wizard growled. “Why doesn’t Marod just order the fool shot and be done with it?”

“He’s tried,” the woman replied. “But every time the archers appear on the towers, the crowd goes insane, and they withdraw rather than risk being pulled down.”

He tried to find calm. He so wanted to see this woman fight. He patted the tamed halfling on the head. “I don’t care how perfect he thinks your foe is, dear,” he said. “You’ll make short work of them.”

She did not respond.

Even if he had given her permission to speak, of course, she *couldn’t*. That had been the key. She could not cry out in

pain, and for the first few days, she had not evinced any other signs that his usual tricks were having any effect, either.

But then it came to him. She was drawing strength from that handicap, he thought. She was reveling in the fact that he could not take her cries of pain from her, no matter how he tried. And he could use that. He could push on that. He could push past it.

He reasoned that a voice is like a sense in reverse. Taste depended on many of the same physical features that some undead creature had destroyed in this subject, so that was easy to clip away. Smell, his studies revealed, was related to taste, so the same alchemical formulae worked double duty there.

Touch, now, had been more difficult. That was, truly, where his own expertise could be best appreciated. That was all magic, the most delicate of ritual extractions and insertions. And it had not taken her overly long to learn to grip her blades without the benefit of feeling them.

Hearing, well … That was just a matter of making sure the help didn't get carried away and push the spikes too far into her ears.

She had not responded when he stroked her hair and whispered. She could not feel his hand. She could not hear his voice.



"That book is worthless!" Shahrokh shouted.

Corvus picked up the copy of the *Book of Founding Stories* and examined it. "Many would agree, Vizar. It is not rare. Its making is merely competent. The contents—"

"The contents are not what Holy Calim set down between those covers!"

Corvus agreed, nodding. "That is true. Though these *are* the covers he inscribed the Ritual of the Rising Wind

between. And the pages themselves are, in fact, very similar. But no, if you pass a palimpsest stone over them, you will not find his writing."

"Such a pathetic trick …" said Shahrokh.

"Now, now," said Corvus. "I believe I did an excellent job switching out the covers. I daresay I even improved both volumes. And, if I may be allowed a bit of pride, I did manage to deceive an efreeti cinderlord and a djinni skylord."

"Tell me where the Book of Calim is, spy. Should I make specific threats, or is it enough to know that every life within a thousand of your ridiculous paces depends on your next words?"

"El Arhapan has filled the arena with the elite of the city, and fifteen thousand slaves," Corvus said. "That is many lives. Many loyal servants of Calim among them."

"The loyal would count their deaths blessed. The Return is the only thing of importance."

"And that book that will ensure it, yes. Which only I can recover, so to speak."

"There are a thousand ways I can drag this secret from your mind, kenku. You do not have to be alive for all of them."

"Ah, well, there's where another of my advantages lie, though I admit its value is … debatable. Shahrokh, you came to me because I am a Graduate Survivor of the Rookery of Tears. The deaths we deal are permanent, irrevocable. Especially when we deal them to ourselves. If you seek to test the truth of this claim, come closer. I will be dead before you can bellow another curse, and the only powers in the universe that could bring me back are powers with no desire to see the return of Calim. Blessed be his name."

Shahrokh moved himself lower. "I hesitate to invite this on myself," he said. "But speak."

"First, no djinni is to act against the wishes or actions of any mortal in this city for, let us say, a day."

The vizar’s eyes turned the color of thunderheads. When they returned to normal, he said, “It is done. My people withdraw to the skies to await my word. Where is the book?”

“Second. No djinni under your command, and not you either, will cause harm to any person who has ever been a member of Nightfeather’s Circus of Wonders for a period of one thousand years, starting now. And let’s say that goes for anyone who signs on in the next year.”

“You recognize how easily I will circumvent this by using mortal agents, I am sure, but on the condition that you reveal the book’s location, then it shall be as you say. Will you mouth more inanities, or is the deal struck?”

Corvus got to his feet. “The copy of the book containing Calim’s ritual hidden in its text was in my nest. When you severed my link with that, the book spilled out, along with many other things I value. Almost all of those things were books. So when you find them, you’ll have to be careful to choose the right one. I trust you’ll not make the mistake of judging a book by its cover again any time soon.”

Shahrokh glowered. “Your judgments of me mean nothing, kenku. I have lived millennia and toppled empires, because I make estimations about my foes. If you think I will now pay some terrible price because I underestimated a mortal, then you have forgotten that my only goal is to hold the book. The forms are fulfilled. So I will meet that goal.”

Corvus said, “The forms, yes. The ancient protocols for striking a deal with a djinni.” He held up the book of stories. “They’re all in here, did you know that?”

Shahrokh did not reply. He crossed his arms, ready to wait as long as necessary.

“You’ll forgive me if I do not simply name a location. The terms of our bargain will be met, I think, as long as I give you adequate directions to find the book. In fact, I think I could even convey them as a series of riddles if I had the time.”

“You think I will blindly follow your directions?” Shahrokh asked.

“I think you must, because that is my third demand. *That* meets the forms.” Corvus leaned over and rolled back carpets until he uncovered the floor. It was coated with dust. He set the book aside, then kneeled and began sketching with one talon.

“You know ritual magic well enough to recognize that these are the sigils needed to open a portal in the mortal world. Surely there’s no place in the mortal world you would be afraid to travel in order to recover the Book of Calim?”



Cephas floated above his father’s house, unpleasantly aware of the scattering of djinn hovering somewhere beyond. They had streamed past him as he flew, as disinterested in him as one might be in a fly.

He did not know why the djinn had withdrawn, and he watched for their return; however, for the moment, he counted it as luck to be unhindered as he studied the courtyards and verandas below. The manor was enormous, and its design included many interior chambers open to the sky. He flew on the windsoul, so his flight must be brief. He went as high as he dared, risking a fall to the manor or even farther if he did not go back down soon.

Ah, he thought, seeing the manor below him. Of course. To a denizen of the elemental plane, something that combined aspects of both earth and wind was necessarily impure. The flagstones lining all the courtyards were perfectly clear. Only the floor of a single round room had something in its character to distinguish it from the rest.

With the last moment of flight granted him by the wind-force, Cephas floated above the foundation stone. He felt his body begin to fall, and he wondered if earth combined with wind had a song of its own.

Then he felt the earth-force gathering inside. It spread through his limbs, and all along his *szuldar*, as the change came over him and his earthsoul manifested.

When he had made the shelter beneath the burning tent in Argentor, Flek told him to shape a space inside himself, a shape he knew well. The shape had been the only home he had ever known—his cell on Jazeerijah. It had barely been large enough to hold him and his friends.

Such a small place would never be sufficient to contain the force he felt inside him. The cell had been his home, but any home he would ever make now must be large enough to contain more than just him and a few others—Ariella and Tobin, Melda and Whitey and all their kin, his long-lost cousins of Argentor, the twins. Grinta the Pike needed space. He must have room, too, for Mattias and Trill, even though they would occupy it in memory. Their memories loomed so large.

Maybe even space for Corvus; he did not yet know.

Cephas opened his eyes against the wind. He extended his arms and legs, pointing himself down toward the foundation stone. He dived through the air, like an aerialist. He gathered his strength, like a strongman.

He clenched his fists, striking for home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Now open this book again. Now begin anew.
There is more yet in these pages.
—“Epigraph” and “Epilogue”
The Founding Stories of Calimshan
Printed and Bound at Calimport
The Year of the Broken Blade (1260 DR)

ON ANOTHER NIGHT, THE BIZARRE INCIDENT THAT SAW a herd of minotaurs finally chasing a goliath into the pits would be the most memorable part of the Games. This would not be the case tonight Marod realized, when a horrified silence fell over the south stands. Nor would the day be remembered because of a fight between twin Arvoreeni adepts.

The silence was replaced by screams, and wholesale panic descended on the arena as eighteen thousand people stormed the exits. The gamemaster’s box was set beneath a billowing tent, so he had to lean out to see why the crowds ran.

His house was not falling as fast as a stone cup cast onto the field might, but its speed was increasing.

From her waiting room in the north wall of the arena, Shan heard the panic and made a quick check of the door between her and the sands. She did not know what disaster was befalling the genasi, but it would doubtless affect her plans. Besting the door's lock would take no time.

On the opposite side of the arena, the Spiritbreaker's assistant did not answer when he asked her to report what she saw outside. The disloyal woman stuck her head out the spyhole and didn't even take the time to draw it back in before she engaged the magic in a ring he hadn't even known she wore. She faded from view.

He frowned and crossed to the door, which opened at a command. The arena was a scene out of a nightmare. The air was full of windsouled flying for the roofline—so many of them that he witnessed a dozen brutal collisions at a glance. Thousands of human and halfling slaves, along with minotaur guards and genasi, either possessed of a lesser soul or already exhausted by a failed effort at flight, packed the dozen exits cut into the stands, climbing and crawling and mindlessly killing in their panic. He saw a yikaria warrior climb up a watersouled nobleman's back and disappear out an entrance by striding across the heads and shoulders of the packed mob.

A shift in the crowd was occurring. An enterprising pair of earthsouled women had smashed through the decking beneath the sands and beckoned other slaves through the gap they'd made down into the pits.

A sudden parting in the crowd of flying windsouled revealed the source of the mayhem. The Spiritbreaker did not at first recognize the structure making a ponderous descent toward the western grandstand, but the rain of furniture, potted trees, artwork, and tiles that fell from it was

so voluminous and, even from his vantage point, bespoke such wealth that he knew it had to be the manor house of one of the great families crashing into the Djen Arena. Then he realized it had to be the el Arhapan mansion where he himself lived, and, oddly, the thought that came to mind then was that he was pleased he kept his books in cases that closed and locked.

Given the size of the estate and the rate it was falling, the destruction would be enormous, and it might take several tendays for the slaves to dig out his rooms near the center of the complex.

He turned, and there was the halfling woman, still holding her short sword and dagger. He made a brief mental review of his various options, and decided that, regrettably, there was no way to escape with her in tow—a pity, but he had learned a great deal from their time together.

He smiled vaguely at her, and as he did so, their eyes met. The potions of the Pasha of Apothecaries were still at work. Her eyes were slow to track his movements, and she seemed barely to recognize him.

He paused. Her reaction was quite interesting, because she shouldn’t be tracking the movement of anyone taller than she was. And, of course, she shouldn’t recognize him even a little.

It was the last thought he ever had.



To conserve the brief moments of flight Ariella could manage while burdened with him, Cephas made a strange and strenuous climb. With the swordmage clinging to his back, he used the regularly spaced joins in the elemental foundation of the el Arhapan estate as finger and toe holds, and as the manor fell downward, he made a great effort to keep to its pace, climbing as fast as he could and so

descending toward the arena at a slower rate than the structure.

Ariella had found him soon after he crashed through the foundation stone. As he fell, the strap that secured his right shoulder guard had caught, swinging him hard against the shifting underside of the estate. One end of the floating artificial island was disproportionately heavier, and when the house began to fall, it first listed sharply, until it was at right angles to its former position.

“The lesser foundation stones must have enough lifting force to slow the fall!” Ariella shouted. “We’ll have to time this carefully to avoid being crushed when it hits the arena!”

Cephas was grimly satisfied with what he saw below. Household guards of the genasi had fought their way to defensive positions at the exits and were organizing a doomed escape into the cavernous spaces below the stands. This left the vastly more numerous slaves to their own devices, but those devices proved the better. The exodus of the slaves through the many holes blasted in the sands of the arena was much better managed than the mad scrums at the exits, or the general free-for-all in the air above the arena where windsouled attempted flights over distances far outside the range of their powers. Cephas hoped the slaves would all escape without injury, though he understood this was a slight possibility.

The nobleborn, though, could be damned.



Seeing one world crash down into another, seeing thousands of people fleeing and fighting for their lives, seeing chaos and tumult unlike anything she had ever known, Shan pared her plan back to its barest essentials.

Find Cynda.

The gamemaster’s tented area was an island of relative calm in the chaos at the far end of the arena. She judged it

the best place to begin.

Five hundred paces of hell separated Shan from her immediate goal. She glanced skyward and, making an estimate of how much time she had to cross, considered her options.

She grazed the hilt of her parrying dagger with the thumb and forefinger of her left finger. She might be able to cut her way across.

Cynda. It was *Cynda* she sought.

Shan drew the dagger and slid it through the straps that held the cuirass of her leather armor tight. She bent, used the dagger's edge to part the laces of her high boots, and stepped out of them.

She ran, and as she came to the outer edge of the panicked mob diving into the warren beneath the arena, she sprang, extending her hands and finding purchase on the shoulders of a man methodically pushing other slaves into the closest pit. She somersaulted through the air, her feet briefly grazing the upraised shield of a household guard who had abandoned her post in the stands.

Shan was a warrior and a scout. She had learned those skills from the finest teachers in the world.

And she was an aerialist. She had learned that skill from her sister.



"Where is Shahrokh?" roared Marod. "Where are any of the damned djinn?"

When his aide did not answer, the master of games turned to find that the man was gone. Fled with all the rest, he thought. How could this have happened? What could cause an entire estate to fall, and how could the djinn disappear at the same time?

Little matter. He would learn who was behind the destruction of his beautiful arena soon enough, and then

they would pay. He was already thinking of ways to continue the Games. The Sabam could be repurposed for more traditional combats, perhaps, or, even better, he could relocate to Manshaka while the djinn rebuilt here.

For now, his best course of action was to retreat into the hidden tunnel that led to the stables and wait out the immediate crisis. He twisted a particular ruby setting in his ornate chair, and rotated the entire seat, revealing a downward-sloping passage.

As soon as he set foot in it, he saw that it was not empty. He would have sworn that no one knew of this passage except himself, Shahrokh, and the earthsouled who dug it and who were killed when they finished their labors.

But there was a halfling slave he did not recognize, just finishing a task he must have been at for some time. The passage between the pasha of games and the halfling was coated with an oily, smoking substance that ate away at the stone.

“Yeah, you don’t want to come down this way,” said the halfling. “These walls is fixing to collapse.”

The pasha gathered his windsoul, preparing to launch through the air at the man, but the halfling had spoken true. The brickwork walls began to crumble, and the ceiling slumped.

Seeing no way through, the pasha stepped back from the hidden entry and shouted in rage. “Who are you?”

The halfling shrugged, and before Marod’s escape route was completely closed to him, he heard the reply from beyond the falling rubble. “We don’t use names.”



The manor crashed to earth.

Sensing Ariella’s exhaustion, when he saw a clear spot through the dust clouds below, Cephas relaxed his grip and dropped a distance perhaps three times his height. He

tucked and rolled when he landed, coming back to his feet with flail held ready, probing the shifting mass of rubble that marked the location of the Djen Arena with his earthsouled senses.

Ariella landed beside him, sword drawn, and stood so that they were back-to-back. “After the fall,” she observed. “Quiet? Not what I expected.”

There were calls and cries in the far distance, but in the immediate area, the only noises came from the clatter of stones and the hiss of sand as the rubble settled. One entire side of the Djen Arena was gone, flattened by the mass of the el Arhapan estate. The interconnected structures built atop the elemental foundation had fared much the same. The parts of the estate that struck first were reduced to nothing, while some walls and even windows retained their integrity, even if they were set askew. The presence of the floating stonework in the rubble led to less devastation in the el Arhapan buildings than might otherwise have been expected.

“No sounds,” he said. “There was time for most of the crowd to escape below then, and I trust that if Corvus lives, we’ll know soon enough. We should try to find the others.”

On the north side of the grounds, they discovered an area of rubble-free sand. The collapsed walls beneath the gamemaster’s box formed an impenetrable barrier on one side of the clearing, and the badlands of ripped-open flooring and rubble encircled its other sides.

Marod el Arhapan lounged in a veranda chair at the center of the sandy space.

The man watched them approach. For a moment Cephas wondered if perhaps his father did not recognize him in his earthsouled manifestation, but he was merely waiting for them to close within conversational distance.

“Your work, of course,” said the pasha. “I suppose I should have guessed, but I trusted Shahrokh to sniff out any plot you’ve been put up to by the WeavePasha or your mother’s

degenerate kin or whoever supplied you with the means to offer me this setback. What have you done with the djinn, by the way? Some repelling magic item? They'll not be happy."

Ariella stepped forward and said, "I would prevent Cephas from patricide, Calimien, but there would be no shame in my blade finding your heart. Have a civil tongue. We only want to find the adepts and the goliath, and then we'll leave you to lord over what's left of your domain."

Cephas put a hand on Ariella's shoulder. "I don't know why your protectors have abandoned you now, Marod el Arhapan," he said to the man before him. To Ariella, he said, "And no patricide is possible. I would have to be his son. He would have to be my father."

The pasha snorted. "It seems that the only thing we share besides our blood, *Cephas*, is the wish that we shared not even that much. But if you doubt my patrimony, you are a fool. Even wearing your mother's cursed secret, it's clear you are an el Arhapan."

Cephas studied the man. "That is the second time you have said that, about the secret of my mother's earthsoul. And yet you said hers was a newly elevated noble family. Your marriage was a cause for controversy, you said. An earthsouled noble making a secret of her earthsoul seems—"

"Seems like a story concocted by a vizar who seldom troubles himself with the finer points of genasi society, yes. I would have pointed out the inconsistencies to him, except that, frankly, I did not care. You would have discovered the truth soon enough. Your mother was a scheming earthsouled slave who somehow learned to manifest windsoul and managed to disguise herself long enough to cost me much trouble and treasure."

Cephas narrowed his eyes. There was still something wrong with Corvus's version of his mother's life story. "What do you mean, treasure?"

The pasha spit. “The escapees. They had to be replaced, all of them. Another flaw in your philosophers’ arguments, Akanûlan. If you free a slave, you simply create the need for another slave to take its place.”

Cephas said, “My mother—”

“Your mother was a liar and a whore. I thought her treatment of the slaves eccentric, but I didn’t learn of her activities with the Janessar until after you were born. I didn’t know how much I was freeing myself when I set her before Azad.”

A tremendous crash sounded nearby, and the three genasi ducked as a sizable chunk of wall flew over their heads. A new cloud of dust rolled out of the rubble, and a pair of coughing figures stumbled into the clearing. Caked in dust and wearing pants sewn together from a dozen slaves’ tunics, Tobin could almost have been back in the circus. As for Corvus, his feathers looked as if they had turned white, until he made a shivering motion that shook most of the dust free.

“Here’s another man who would kill you for me, Father,” said Cephas.

Corvus looked at the genasi as if he were studying a tableau he was not quite convinced warranted inclusion in a circus performance. “If you like,” he said at last. “I owe you far more than that. It isn’t necessary, though. If the djinn suffer him to live, the life they leave him will be more punishment than anything we’ll mete out.”

There was another flurry of motion, and then Shan was among them. She carried a miserable form in her arms. Cynda, eyes shut and holding a bloody short sword in a curiously loose grip that left its tip dragging the sand, seemed aware of nothing but her sister’s strong arms, which she sought to burrow deeper into when the companions cried out.

Cephas watched Shan turn and shield Cynda from even the gentle ministrations offered by Tobin. No one would ever

again have difficulty telling the women apart, unless whatever terrible tortures scarred Cynda were also visited on Shan. He realized he would do anything to prevent that from happening.

Marod el Arhapan stood and looked from the twins to Cephas. He rolled his shoulders and spread his arms wide.

Cephas dropped his flail to the sand and spoke to Corvus. “I do not think you know what punishments I am capable of meting out, Ringmaster.”

Corvus did not try to stop him.

They met on the sands of an arena, but their fight was not an entertainment. As he rushed toward the windsouled man who only resembled him on the outside, Cephas knew that what was about to happen was brutal, ugly, terrifying.

Marod el Arhapan was a connoisseur of fighting, not a fighter himself.

When Cephas took his life with a single wrench, it was not an entertainment. It was a punishment, one long overdue.



The WeavePasha considered the extraordinary mess in his scrying chamber. He considered again whether to allow his granddaughter to supervise her apprentices in cleaning it, but again decided it was too dangerous.

No, there was nothing to be done but to survey the damage caused by the kenku’s escape, and salvage what he could.

“That’s odd,” said the WeavePasha. Speaking of Corvus Nightfeather, he could have sworn he had given the kenku the particular volume of centaur verse at his feet several decades past. In fact, there was something peculiar about all of the rubbish tumbled in the center of the chamber.

It was mostly books, and they weren’t as damaged as they should have been after the conflagration. They were all very

rare books; so rare that they weren’t even all to be found in his own library.

The familiar vibration of an activating portal came to his arcane senses. The old man whispered a few words and drew the knife that was always at his belt. He could sense who this unexpected, and most unwelcome, visitor was.

Shahrokh’s preparations were impressive, the WeavePasha supposed, for a djinni.



Ninlilah felt the dressing at the jagged end of her left horn. It was dry, and she decided she would have to wait only another few days before she could dispense with it. She had little to do out here but wait, after all.

She had already practiced enough since her injury that she was comfortable with her axe again. The odd change in her balance that followed the fight in the Spires of Mir had required a change in some of her techniques, and this training camp was the ideal place to develop those. It would have gone easier if some of the gladiators had stayed to practice with her, but they had elected to leave with all the other slaves when she descended on the camp’s overseers out of the desert night.

There was another deep agent of the Janessar like herself in the camp. He had been furious that she had broken cover, but there was little the man could do besides lead the compound’s slaves north when she told him her plans.

Eventually, Marod el Arhapan would travel here to check on his stable. And then the man whose black will she had enacted for so long, even to the point of letting dear Valandra die, would die himself.

She’d seen Cephas through the flames—after all these years, Valandra’s son. And no sooner had she found him than he was lost forever.

She did not know what she would do after she killed el Arhapan. It largely depended on whether he was accompanied by a djinni when he came through the portal. In that case, she would most likely die, too. If he came alone, or was accompanied only by windsouled, then she would survive.

The Janessar might be sympathetic because of her reasons, some of them, but they would not allow her to work with them again. She supposed she might try to make it into Calimport and convince the other yikaria to leave the Emirates once and for all.

The circle of fine white sand she'd poured as a warning signal around the chamber stirred. Air was blowing inward.

At last, el Arhapan was coming. She shouldered her axe.

And she saw people she had never thought to see again. The goliath—the strongest fighter she had ever faced—was the most instantly recognizable. She did not see a deadly archer among them, but she had barely spotted the archer in the Spires of Mir, either. This was no good; there were too many.

And then there he was. He spoke to her.

"Put down your axe, 'Lilah," said Cephas.

EPILOGUE

And he shall come from a great house of pain
with hair of spun gold and eyes of the sea.
He shall break the bonds that hold him,
light the end of Oppression's Road for many,
and free the tortured peoples
from the evil grip of bondage.
—The Nar'ysr
Augury 22
The Phoenix Prophecies

FOR ALL THAT A CLOWN TWICE HIS HEIGHT MADE FOR AN odd spectacle, it was even odder that Talid felt, for some reason, that he should recognize the man.

The three clowns behind the goliath, though, the ones with crossbows, Talid was sure he had never seen them.

As was his habit when guarding the upland bridge, he waved them through without a word, along with the kenku that followed, and the pair of halfling women wearing terrifying terra-cotta masks—one scowling, one smiling.

Cephas flew through the air over the canvas, tumbling. He wore a loose cloak over his armor so that his silver skin was not obvious, but he cast this off as he dived.

When he struck the arena floor, he struck as earthsouled. The crowd was small, but it roared.

Grinta the Pike was standing along one side of the canvas, leaning back against an extended bridge and keeping a pair of human men at a distance with her namesake weapon. If she was surprised to see him, she made no sign.

Instead, she made a quick pass with the pike, and the two mercenaries found themselves disarmed. They looked back and forth between the orc and Cephas with confusion and fear.

“Come on,” Grinta said to them, climbing onto the bridge as it retracted. “I have a feeling we’re about to see a better show than the one we were putting on.”



“Come out, Azad,” said Cephas. “Come out onto the canvas.”

He searched the stands and saw more people there. All the slaves and freedmen of Jazeerijah filed in, joining the handful of dozing goblins already present.

Azad answered from the gamemaster’s box, his response hesitant but still amplified enough to ring out across the canyon.

“Is that why you came back here, Cephas? You want me to fight you?”

The crowd buzzed at that, and Cephas caught the barest hint of the old bloodlust.

“No,” he shouted, answering Azad but speaking to all. “I have learned who you once were, Azad. I know that I bear the arms and armor you once wore, and that you were a mighty gladiator. But those days are long gone. I want something else. I want you to tell a story.”

Azad shook his head. “You took my book, Cephas. I don’t tell stories anymore.”

“This is a story that was never written down,” Cephas said, turning to address the crowd. “The story of the last fight of Azad the Free!”

“My last fight was long ago,” said Azad.

“Yes,” said Cephas. “Yes, that is the story I want to hear.”

In reply, Azad the Free sobbed.

It was a single, wracked cry; he swallowed it and cursed, but it rang across the canyon. The crowd grew silent.

Then, Azad said, “It is not a story. It is a lie. It was a lie.

“Marod told me he would send the deadliest fighter of the age against me to prove my glory forever. I thought he meant Shaneerah. I told him I would not fight her, but he said there was a woman even deadlier. He said she was a master of the feint and the hidden blow. He said she was impossible to predict. She was … She was a tired, ill woman who did not know how to hold a spear. But I did not know. I thought …”

“You thought it was a trick,” said Cephas. “And it was. But not the one you looked for. You were promised a glorious last battle, and instead you were used as a headsman’s axe, then rewarded with retirement all the same. And when you went to your reward, the woman’s son—”

“You could barely even speak,” said Azad. “You toddled around, hiding from everyone but the yikaria. Marod couldn’t stand the sight of you. And when he grew tired of having me at his table, he decided it would be amusing to give me a duty worthy of a household slave. I was to read his son to sleep.”

Cephas studied the canvas. This was so difficult, but he had come here for a reason.

“Azad, come out onto the canvas,” he said again.

The shattered old man at the lectern shook his head. “I will not fight you, Cephas,” he said.

Cephas held the flail up for all to see. He dropped it. “I did not come here to fight you, Azad. Or any of you.” He looked at the others. “I came here—we came here—to set you free.”

The slaves of the mote peered at one another, and at the Calishites, but stayed quiet. The voice that answered was Shaneerah’s. “You may take the slaves, earthsouled,” she said. “No, I offer even more. We will leave, my husband and I, and any others who want to come. But you are giving us nothing. My husband is Azad the Free. We are his freedmen. We have no chains you can break.”

Her voice carried strangely, and Cephas realized it was because she was moving as she spoke. She appeared behind the lectern and put one arm around her husband’s shoulder. Ninlilah and Ariella shadowed her.

Cephas said, “Not all chains are forged of steel, Shaneerah.”

Azad had withdrawn so far into himself that he reminded Cephas of those first bad months Cynda had before Elder Lin’s healing began to bring her back around. Shaneerah was the very opposite of Lin, her hate pure and undiminished.

“We have no chains you can break,” she repeated, and led her husband away.



Corvus joined Cephas at the podium as the last of the cables was drawn back in. Down in the canyon, Whitey and Melda supervised the newly freed slaves of Jazeerijah in rolling the canvas onto a wagon-mounted frame. The master clown believed there was enough of the sailcloth for a big top and two sizable side tents.

“Your formula didn’t get all the bloodstains out,” Cephas said, watching the work.

“Stains we can see and chains we can’t,” said Corvus. “Your cousins in Argentor will be impressed by all this

symbolism.”

Cephas smiled with sadness, thinking of Sonnett’s and Lin’s disappointment with him. “More impressed than they are with my plans, anyway.”

Corvus clicked his tongue. It was not the sound he used for laughter, but a lower, hollower noise he had sounded more and more often in the last months. Cephas had still not decided exactly what it indicated, and he wondered if the kenku knew himself.

“They will not countenance violence, and we must not ask them to. But if you mean to take an active stance against slavery to complement Acham el Jhotos’s plans of centuries, and the Janessar plans of secrecy, then you must use the tools you have. My sword. Your flail.”

Cephas laughed. “I think I might make use of other tools of yours than just your short sword, old friend. I have arms and armor for this fight that the pashas cannot imagine.”

Light came up from below. The cookfires were being set among the wagons of the circus, and Whitey’s family and the other circus folk set aside their work.

Corvus stared out over the Island of the Free, where the freedmen who had not followed Shaneerah deeper into the mountains were pulling down the last of the old buildings under Tobin’s enthusiastic direction.

The twins and Ninlilah were spending the night with Grinta and her Bloody Moons, cementing their unlikely alliance, so it would be a quiet night in the canyon.

The kenku almost spoke aloud, but Ariella joined them, reaching her arm around Cephas.

So Corvus spoke to himself, and only to echo the earthsouled. “Arms and armor they cannot imagine, my friend. That they cannot imagine.”

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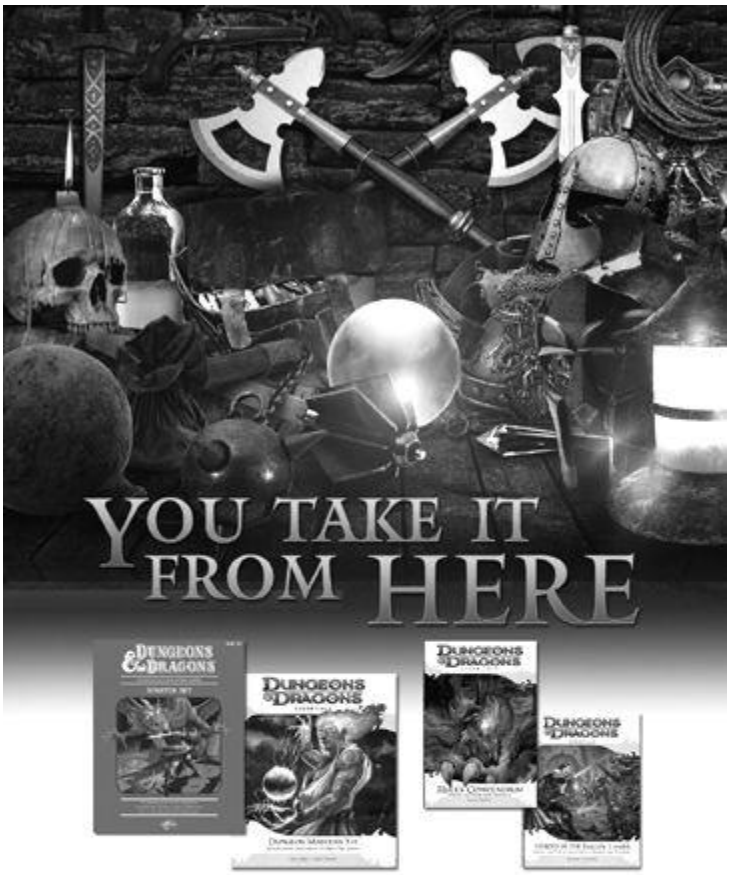
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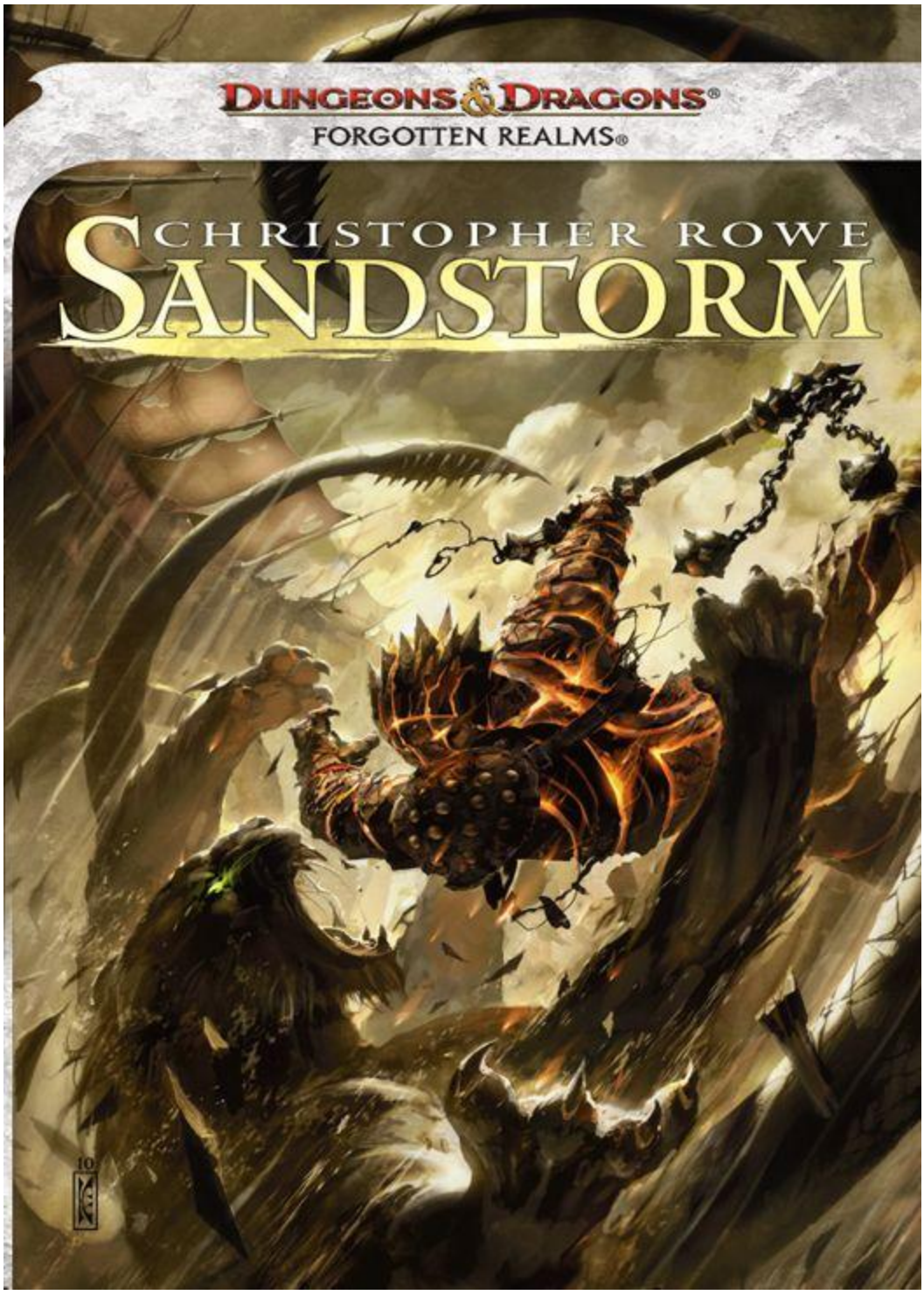


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